Amantes de la Noche #2

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Amantes de la Noche #2
(Lovers of the Night)

A *Forever Knight* Fanzine

The fiction in this zine has been previously published on the Internet.
PLEASE NOTE: Some of the stories in this zine contain sexual themes and violence, and are intended for mature readers.

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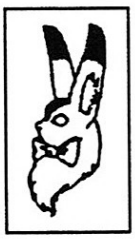

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Hi there!

Welcome to our second anthology of third-season *Forever Knight* fiction from the Internet.

This issue features a mix of authors who had stories in the first issue of *Amantes de la Noche,* and some new faces. Bonnie's trilogy "Faraway Inside" concludes this issue. Nancy and Christina are back with new stories—but they've swapped venues. After from last issue's comedy, Nancy brings us "The Phoenix", a wonderful, dark-and-convoluted, post-series novella, while Christina has moved *to* comedy this issue, with "My Evil Twin is a Vampire." Let me issue a serious consumer warning on that one: don't read it while you're drinking, unless you want Coke stains on the wall way-over-there. <g>

Our first-time faces provide a wide-ranging mixture of interpretations and styles, from Janice's action/adventures to Apache's fantastic mood vignettes. I was happy to locate some fiction that mixed-and-matched the characters in ways completely different from what we saw on the series. Janice's "Guilt Trip" teams Nick and Vachon in one thread, and Natalie and Tracy in another. D. Echelbarger puts the show's three mortal women—Nat, Tracy and Grace—together for a night on the town. Stephanie explores an alternate path through "Ashes to Ashes" and "Last Knight", while Dorothy and Kim each consider the aftermath of series events as they were broadcast. All in all, it's another wonderfully mixed bag.

I'd like to say thanks to the writers for allowing me to present their word to an audience who might otherwise miss it.

And I hope you enjoy it.

Marg Baskin
1997/04/05

Guilt Trip

by Janice Cox

She stepped out into the alley, a blast of noise from the nightclub following her. The heavy steel door thudded shut solidly behind her, cutting off the pulsing beat of the music in mid-note. Carefully the dark-haired woman checked her hair and clothes. Every hair in place, she started unsteadily down the dark alley, a duchess at the end of a week-long bender. Singing softly in French, she reached the end of the alley and headed unerringly toward the illustrious—and very discrete—Quebec Biltmore. Silently, one of the alley shadows coalesced into the form of a man and followed . . .

❑❑❑❑❑

Tracy Vetter approached the abandoned Church of Immaculate Suffering with trepidation. Although she'd been to this building many times in the last few months, it was the first time that always stayed with her. She'd been investigating a plane crash, and had followed a lead here. Against her better instincts she'd gone in alone.

Just like this time.

But it was different now, she reminded herself as she levered open the heavy wooden door. The vampire who had attacked her was dead. The vampire. Amazingly, the idea of vampires living among us no longer shocked her. It was just another one of those unexplainable things, like "what existed before God" or "why can't men put the lid down." Oh, sure, it was maddening not to be able to talk about it sometimes, but she could just imagine the look on her partner's face if she tried. Nick was a good guy, but he'd have her in restraints long before she got to the part about falling seriously for—

"Vachon?" She looked around the first floor doubtfully. A single candle flickered dimly at the altar, but the only sound was the flapping of faded curtains and dropcloths in the cool night air. He must have already gone out.

"You know, you really need to get an answering machine. Of course, first you'd have to get a *phone*," she informed the empty room loudly. She could always try the Raven, of course, but that place gave her the big-time creeps. Most bars were like meat markets, but that place was ridiculous. Shrugging in disgust, she turned to go.

"I don't think He needs an answering machine," came a familiar voice from behind her. It was Vachon, sitting casually on an overturned pew. Dressed in faded jeans and an old leather jacket, with a day's beard on his handsome face, he still managed to look so, so—ageless.

"You know, you can be so irritating sometimes." She smiled as she said it, her hand dropping from her holster where it had gone by reflex. "You don't have a phone. You don't have electricity. What do you *do* all night?" She walked across the cluttered floor to settle casually beside him.

"I read." He waived a newspaper in front of her. "You know, that thing people did *before* television. You should try it sometime."

"Oh, ha, ha. I try to read the paper, but usually I don't have time to catch more than the front page. French, huh? Very impressive."

Ignoring her sarcasm, he grinned modestly and replied, "I try to keep up. Languages change so quickly. If we go too many years without speaking one, we sound archaic." He shrugged and tapped her knee lightly with the rolled paper. "But I don't think you came down here to talk about the linguistic problems of vampires. What's up? You on another weird case?"

"No. I'm off duty today, actually." She dropped her eyes to her hands, which were twisting nervously. "I, um, I happened to get two tickets to the Eagles reunion concert tomorrow, and I thought, well, if you weren't doing anything . . ."

"You're asking me for a date?" he asked bemusedly.

"No! Well, I mean, if you're not busy, I thought . . ." Risking a glance at him, she saw he was grinning, clearly enjoying her discomfiture. "Okay, a date. Do you want to go, or not?"

❑❑❑❑❑

Javier Vachon dropped lightly into the alley behind the Raven and nodded politely to the old gentleman who was coming out. The older man nodded regally, cast a disparaging look at Vachon's scruffy appearance, then lifted gracefully into the night. Vachon caught the door before it could slam shut and slipped quietly inside.

As he settled comfortably into his usual spot, Vachon reflected on just how settled his life was becoming. No longer running from the Inca, he had allowed himself to become comfortable with his routine, with the city. Even after nearly dying from a mortal-made disease, he hadn't moved on. Sipping moodily at his drink, he watched the dancers and tried to push it from his mind.

The newspaper had contained disturbing news, but thinking of that only brought Tracy back into his thoughts. She had looked very pretty tonight. Relentlessly, he pushed the image of her shining hair, the way her face had lit up when he'd said yes, from his mind. It was crazy to even think of, of, whatever he'd been thinking. She was a mortal. He wasn't. End of story. He was still brooding when another man—vampire, his senses instantly informed him—sat down at his table.

"Mind if I join you? You certainly look pensive tonight, Vachon."

It was Nick.

"Yeah, well, I know it's normally your bit, but I didn't think you'd mind." He watched carefully until he saw that Nick wasn't going to take offense, then took another drink. "Nick Knight" might look like a gentle, inoffensive guy, but Vachon knew that the eight-hundred-year-old vampire beside him could toss him around like a toy. You didn't mess with the big boys if you wanted to live long. "Haven't seen you around here lately."

"Too many memories."

"Yeah." There had been a dust-up recently, something to do with the former owner of the bar. Word was that she and Nick had been a hot item once, and that whatever just happened hadn't been good. A lot of crazy rumors were floating around—some of them *really* crazy—but nobody involved was talking. LaCroix probably knew, but he'd spend an hour in a tanning bed before he'd try to pry secrets out of *that* guy. Nick was still looking inquiringly at him.

"The Etude burned down, night before last." At Nick's blank look he added, "It's a Community hangout up in Quebec. Guy named Merrault put in some rooms below the bar about a hundred years ago. I have a friend who was staying there last I heard."

"Arson?"

"The papers say so. No mention of bodies, of course. Maybe it changed hands. Maybe they all got out okay. It's probably nothing." He pulled out the paper and slid it across to Nick. "You have any contacts in the city?"

"No. Aristotle might, or LaCroix." Nick frowned, then handed the paper back to Vachon. "Why don't I check it out at the station? The police report might have information that they didn't release to the public."

"Yeah." Nick looked alert now, Vachon saw. Like he'd just caught sight of a beautiful woman, or the scent of his next kill. "Why don't I tag along? I used to know that area pretty well."

The older man shrugged, then nodded.

"Let's go."

❑❑❑❑❑

It was good to be doing something.

Ever since Janette had returned and then . . . left again, Nick had been ill at ease with himself. Janette would never forgive him, and lately he wasn't sure he could forgive himself. From the moment that Janette had reappeared, mortal, nothing had seemed real. Looking back now, it was as if he'd been a sleepwalker, walking through the scenes of his own life. When he should have been feeling joy for Janette—for she, at least, had escaped this evil "life"—there had been only an emptiness, almost a feeling of . . . sorrow?

No.

He had been shocked, that was all. Everything had happened so quickly. There hadn't been time to talk about it with Janette, with . . . Natalie. Nat had been acting as strangely as he, seemingly angry that a—non-scientific?—cure had been found. If there had been more time, he would have become happy for Janette and the new life she had found. He would have, he was sure of it. If only she hadn't started to die . . .

That was the one thing he couldn't bear. To watch her life fade away, never again to see her eyes, hear her laugh. The sorrow that had welled up inside him had washed away everything else, and he had acted. Even at the time he had known the depths of his betrayal, and it hadn't mattered. Nothing else mattered but Janette, quickly slipping away. Was this what LaCroix felt, why he fought so hard to keep Nick from mortality? Unable to spend another night alone in his apartment, he had come to find out.

But LaCroix was already working, his commanding voice coming through the Raven's rear speakers from the CERK recording studio in the back. Nick had been tempted to leave, to forget it, when he'd seen Vachon. The younger vampire hadn't been wearing his usual easygoing "slacker" expression, but instead looked worried and preoccupied. Impulsively, Nick had sat down.

Now he was back at the station, Vachon trailing uneasily behind him. Nick grinned inwardly. Many vampires developed a dislike for law enforcement—or any mortal authority, for that matter—but Vachon seemed to have it worse than most. Of course, the looks he was getting wouldn't help. To the other cops, Vachon, in his leather and long hair, looked like one of the Bad Guys. With relief, Nick saw that the squad room was nearly empty. That ought to calm Vachon down and keep their little fishing expedition quiet.

❑❑❑❑❑

The case had already been closed. Vachon didn't need Nick to tell him what that meant. The Enforcers had come in, and swept the entire thing under the—mortal—rug. Which meant that the Community *had* been involved. And that Louis might have been there.

"Okay, I'm ready." Tracy walked out of the bedroom, patting lightly at her shoulder-length hair. The snug jeans and thin sweater she had put on did nothing to hide her very nice figure. She had kept him waiting—for he'd insisted that it would be easier for him to pick her up—for only a couple of minutes.

"Not bad." It wasn't until he heard the words that Vachon realized he'd spoke aloud.

"Thanks." She smiled shyly, and the clever retort he'd planned went out the window. Instead, he offered her his arm grandly.

"My lady, your chariot awaits."

❑❑❑❑❑

It hadn't gone well. Natalie had invited him over to watch *Gone With the Wind*—it was one of her favorites, right up there with *The Sound of Music*—and he had thought that her company might be just what he needed. But he'd been unable to concentrate on the movie, and worse, hadn't been able to hide that fact from Nat. She'd tried to be understanding, he knew. But how could he explain it to her, when he didn't

understand himself? He'd always been so sure that mortality was what he wanted. Now, for the first time in hundreds of years, he had doubts. He cared for Natalie, wanted her badly, but . . .

But.

In the end, he had called it an early evening. Now he prowled the squad room, looking for something, anything, to keep him occupied. He'd been going over one of their open cases when a fax came in from Quebec.

It was pretty much what he expected. Lab tests had been mysteriously "lost", and a summary closing report was already on file. Still, maybe there was something in the evidence report that would allay Vachon's worries. He scanned the lost quickly, then came back to an item which sounded familiar.

One gold locket, ca 1850 France, engraved. Such a small thing, one line.

"Janette."

❑❑❑❑❑

He was a murderer, just like all the rest. He dressed better than some, in his black, tailored suit, but underneath throbbed the soul of a monster. Cain watched as the man stepped from the cab, then turned to pay the driver. Good. He was unaware. The monster shared a joke with the cabbie, then turned and walked up the steps to his condominium. Cain waited as the cab pulled away into the lightening street, then followed.

The following day the television was full of the sudden, tragic death of Pierre DuPonte, noted industrialist and philanthropist. The police were blaming it on a leaking gas main, and making loud accusations against the builder. Cain would like to have screamed the truth to the very heavens, but that would not have been wise. Perhaps years ago he would have been believed. Been lauded as a hero, even. Now he must work in secret, killing the evil vampire monsters in their lairs and then hiding the remains from an inquisitive police force. Methodically, he daubed at the bloodstains on his coat. Long experience told him that cold water would eventually remove them. He mustn't attract undue attention when he began his work again.

❑❑❑❑❑

The concert had been fantastic.

It had also been *loud*. Surreptitiously, Tracy rubbed at her ringing ears as she and Vachon walked up the stairs to her apartment. After the concert he'd taken her out for a ride on his Triumph, and that had been fun, too. She hadn't been on anything more than a dirt bike before, and the speed and wind—not to mention being pressed close to Vachon, her arms tight around his waist—had been intoxicating. It had also been *noisy*, and she was beginning to despair of ever getting her hearing back.

"Well, here we are." Even to her own ears, her voice sounded funny. Leftovers from the concert, she supposed.

"Safe and sound," Vachon added. He looked alive, more so than she could ever remember seeing him. Tracy had the feeling that he didn't share this face with too many people. And he was getting ready to leave.

"I've got that Meatloaf CD we were talking about, if it's not too late. Do you want to come in?" She forced herself to keep her voice light and casual, hoping that he wouldn't hear her pounding heart. *What are you getting yourself into, Trace?* Vachon had been in her apartment before, of course, but something seemed different tonight. Better. Maybe Vachon felt it, too.

"Why not?" He shrugged casually, but she got the feeling that he didn't want to go, either.

Distracted, Tracy pushed harder than she needed to, and the door swung open and slammed loudly against the wall. From inside, something crashed and there was a thud of movement. In a flash Vachon was past her, moving into the room and between her and the supposed intruder. Calmly, Tracy reached out and flicked on the living room light.

"I see you've met my roommate." She got it out with a straight face, but couldn't hold it as she saw Vachon's expression. He had gone unerringly to the source of the noise, and was now face to nose with a large, green, and very surprised iguana. She burst into laughter, and after a moment he joined her.

"You have a pet iguana." He had sobered somewhat, and watched dubiously as she calmed the big lizard.

"Yep. This is Fluffy. He's a five-year-old green iguana. I got him a couple of weeks ago from a friend who had to move and couldn't take him with her. He's a great pet, really," she continued, as he stared at her in surprise. "He doesn't need to go for a walk, he's quiet, and he doesn't scratch up the furniture. The perfect apartment pet." Fluffy flicked his tongue at Vachon, then stared at him impassively.

Still carrying the iguana, Tracy led them into the living room, where she put Meatloaf's "Bat out of Hell" CD in the player. It seemed only natural to sit together on the couch, Fluffy between them, as they listened to the flamboyant musician sing about adolescent angst. After a while Fluffy began to blink sleepily and Tracy excused herself long enough to return him to his warmed bed. It felt warm in the room, too, and she stopped in the kitchen to get a cool glass of water.

"Um, I'd offer you something to drink, but I've only got, well, the usual," she called into the other room. After a moment, Vachon appeared in the doorway and leaned easily against the wooden frame. "I had some left from before," she added, alluding to Vachon's recent brush with death, "but that stuff goes over pretty fast. How do you keep it fresh? I mean, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Some kind of anti-coagulant. I'm not really sure how it works."

"Kind of like homogenized milk, huh?" They both smiled, and began to walk back toward the living room. At the couch, Vachon paused.

"Look, it's getting pretty late. If you want to throw me out of here and get some sleep, just say the word. I'm not going to be offended, or anything."

"No. Remember, I work the night shift. This is like mid-afternoon for me." That was a little bit of an exaggeration, but in a good cause.

"You sure?" He was standing very close.

"Yeah. I'd really like you to stay." She was still trying to

say something else, to make her statement a little less bald, when he kissed her.

❑❑❑❑❑

"Knight? Hey, Knight! Aren't you supposed to be off tonight?" Nick looked up from the fax, his face utterly blank.

"I'm sorry, Rich. What did you say?"

"I said go home, Knight. You trying to make the rest of us look bad? This time of night, whatever you've got'll keep until tomorrow." The burly detective stretched, then shook his head wearily. "It's damned near dawn now. Go get some sleep."

With a start, Nick looked at his watch. Four fifteen. Sunrise was in a little over two hours.

"Damn. Okay, I'm going. And Rich? Do me a favor. Tell Reese I'm taking some time off."

"Just like that? Captain'll have your narrow butt on a platter, Knight."

Nick was already putting on his jacket, the fax still clutched tightly in one hand. "Tell him it's a family emergency, and that I'll call as soon as I can." Not waiting for a reply, he ran for the door as fast as he dared.

❑❑❑❑❑

Their first kiss had quickly led to others. Somewhere along the way back to Tracy's couch he had lost his jacket, but the room still seemed far too warm. Tracy was in his arms, her quick heartbeat wordlessly urging him on. Breaking their kiss, his mouth travelled slowly down the curve of her neck. In response, Tracy's hand tightened at the back of his neck. Gently, he ran his canines over the pulse he found there. Heaven was just a heartbeat away.

Reluctantly, he pulled back. It wasn't right. Tracy hadn't asked for this, couldn't want it.

"Vachon? What's wrong?" Her voice was low, husky. He started to turn away but stopped at the gentle touch of her hand on his cheek. "Don't."

"Tracy, I—" Whatever he had been going to say was stopped by her gentle kiss. As their kiss deepened, he felt the tip of her tongue brush against the tip of one sharp fang. She didn't pull away.

❑❑❑❑❑

"Vachon!" Nick dropped down into the abandoned church, extending his senses for the younger vampire. As usual, the place was filled with clutter, but Javier was nowhere to be found. It was getting close to dawn, and Nick needed to find the Spaniard before then. Where else—? According to Urs, he hadn't been to the Raven all night. Damn it! Vachon was familiar with the city of Quebec, could easily lead him to the Community there. But he'd never make their flight tomorrow night if Nick didn't tell him in advance. The man didn't even have a phone, for God's sake!

Phone. He'd promised himself he'd tell Tracy before he left. He checked his watch again. It was five in the morning. She would be home, at least. He dialed the number from memory, then listened for her answering machine.

Busy. He dialed again, and got the same response. Nick cut the connection in irritation and scrawled a quick note for Vachon. He'd run by Tracy's on his way home, and hope that Vachon got the message in time.

He couldn't afford to wait any longer.

❑❑❑❑❑

Their kiss broke, and Tracy looked up into Vachon's amber eyes. The vampire was very much in evidence, and part of her knew that she was probably in danger, but none of that seemed to matter very much. Vachon would never hurt her. The thought came to her cleanly, with no doubts or qualifications attached. Even through the flush of their shared desire, she could see the concern in his face, feel the gentleness of his touch. She touched his cheek gently, and he bent his head to kiss her again while one hand moved slowly down the curve of her body . . .

And then he was gone.

Gasping for breath, she sat upright on the couch and looked around in confusion. In the dim light she could just make out his silhouette against the window.

"Vachon?"

"We can't, Trace. Damn it, I almost . . ." He trailed off uncertainly. "I could've killed you, Tracy."

"No." Tracy pulled herself up off the couch and stumbled over boots and leather jacket as she made her way to him. "I know you, Javier. You aren't going to hurt me." At the sound of her voice behind him he started to turn, then pulled away.

"C'mon, Tracy. You know what I am. What I could do to you. Look, maybe we should have talked about this more, but you've got to know there can't be anything between us." She shrugged and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Too late," she said lightly. He pulled free and moved just out of reach. "Vachon, I know what you are. And I know that you don't want to kill me." She waited, and only silence filled the void. Time to go for broke, then. "I want you, Javier. I guess I have for a long time. And you said that the bite doesn't have to be fatal. Why can't we—" She stopped as he turned to look at her, his face a mixture of desire and despair.

"It's too much of a risk. Yeah, we don't have to kill. But we *can*, even when we don't want to. The feelings, the desire gets out of hand . . . You wouldn't understand." She interrupted him with a shaky laugh.

"Maybe I would. Look, Vachon, I'm not stupid. I know there are risks. But I've read the reports." That seemed to get his attention. "The autopsy reports. Half the time the primary cause of death isn't even blood loss, it's shock. Or something else we can't even identify."

"Yeah." He nodded reluctantly. "The contact is more than just physical. It's mental, too. Kind of like our little mental whammy."

"And I'm a resistor," she concluded quietly. For a moment she was afraid that it was too much, that she'd pushed him too far. His whole body was trembling, his hands clenching and unclenching spasmodically. When he finally spoke, his voice was little more than a whisper.

"Are you sure? Is it what *you* want, Tracy?" His large brown eyes pleaded for her to say yes.

"Am I sure? I'd be lying if I said that I wasn't a little afraid. But I'm a big girl, Javier. And I'm willing to risk it if you are." She took a single step forward, and held out her hand. "Are you?"

❑❑❑❑❑

She wasn't home. Most of her neighbors were, however.

"Hey! Keep it down out there! Don'tcha know what time it is?" Grumbles from two other doors on Tracy's floor added to the din.

Nick was well aware of the time. He pounded again on his partner's door, then leaned against it in disgust. Five forty-five a.m. He could feel dawn just around the corner, waiting to force him into inactivity for the day. But there was still so much he needed to do . . .

When he'd agreed to check on an arson case in the city of Quebec for Vachon, he'd just been looking for something to do, something to keep the pain and confusion away for a little while. Then he had seen it: an evidence report listing the small gold locket he'd given to Janette more than a century ago. Found in a Community hideaway that had been burned to the ground. Now Vachon, who knew the area and the Community there, was missing.

And so was his partner. He was about to call it quits when his vampire hearing picked up a voice from inside. Voices. Carefully, he unsnapped the strap on his holster, then stood to the side of the door. It was probably nothing, but they'd both made a few enemies. More than a few. And it wouldn't be the first time one of them had visited Tracy here.

"Tracy?" Knowing that his voice would carry through the thin door, he rapped lightly. "Tracy, it's Nick." The soft murmur of voices through the door, then he heard the lock slide back. The door opened a few inches, and Tracy peered out.

"Nick? What are you doing here? Do you know what time it is?"

"Yes. Is everything all right? I need to talk to you."

"Yeah, sure, everything's fine." As he started to step forward, she put an arm across the doorway. "But, I'm kind of busy right now. Why don't you call me later?"

Belatedly, he took a closer look at his partner. Her skin was flushed, her hair mussed, and she was wearing a faded nightshirt and . . . nothing else. Understanding flooded through him, and he felt himself blush.

"Ah. I'm sorry. I tried to call, but . . . It's not that important."

Tracy frowned at him.

"Look, I'm sorry, Nick. You just caught me off guard. If it was important enough to bring you out here at this hour, then of course you can come in." She looked embarrassed now, too, which made it a little easier.

"Forget it. I just need to take a little time off, that's all. Look, I left word at the station. I'll be out of town for a few days on family business. I just didn't want to take off without saying anything. And you're right, it is getting late. I'd better get going."

"Okay. Nick, are you sure you're okay? I could take some time off, come with you . . . ?" He shook his head.

"No, I'll be fine." Before she could ask another question, Nick turned and quickly headed toward the elevator. Dawn was on its way.

❑❑❑❑❑

Tracy closed and locked the door, a frown knitting her eyebrows together.

"Well, that was weird."

"What did he want?" Vachon had come up behind her and now slipped his arms around her waist, bending his head slightly to nuzzle one ear. She relaxed back into his embrace.

"I don't know for sure. He said he's going to be out of town for a few days. Something about his family. I didn't think Nick had any family."

Vachon's hands stopped their slow exploration almost before it had begun.

"Family?"

"That's what he said. What is it? You don't think he's in trouble, do you?" Vachon paused, then resumed his exploration.

"I think Nick knows how to take care of himself. And, anyway, he's not going anywhere at this time of day. It'll keep." The last words were muffled as he began to nuzzle the nape of her neck.

This time of day? Oh, his skin allergy. It was getting harder to think rationally, but for a moment the thought stayed in her mind. *He's just like Vachon . . .* Then it was gone, and he was leading her back to the bedroom, with its heavy curtains already shut against the encroaching day.

❑❑❑❑❑

"Tracy? Hey, sleepyhead. Time to get up." Vachon reached down and ruffled her blond hair. He could hear the slow, steady beat of her heart, but she was so pale . . . He debated letting her sleep, decided against it.

"Trace?" After a long moment she stirred, blinking up at him in surprise. Then memory flooded her face, and she smiled. His lingering doubts fled as she sat up and reached for him.

"Morning." Her kiss was sweet and light.

"Evening, actually. We slept the day away, kiddo."

She sat back in surprise. "What time is it?" She looked over at the alarm clock, then made a noise of disgust. "Oh, shoot. I'm supposed to be at work in half an hour." She blinked then shook her head in surprise. "I can't believe I slept so late. Did you leave any hot water?"

❑❑❑❑❑

Tracy insisted that she felt fine, but allowed him to make—with extensive supervision—a hearty breakfast for her. Their shared laughter over his attempts at a cheese-potato-green onion omelette washed away any lingering awkwardness

between them, and he watched her get ready to leave with real regret.

"You'll go over and check on Nick? He's still not answering his phone." She frowned lightly as she hung up the phone, then grinned as she saw him examining the leftover dishes in the sink. "Why don't I take care of that when I get home?"

"Excellent idea. This stuff smelled bad enough while it was cooking." He grimaced and set the frying pan down. "You sure you don't want me to take you to work?"

"Will you stop worrying? I'm fine." She reached up and kissed him on the cheek. "I know you've got stuff to do tonight, but I'll be off at three. You're welcome to come by . . ." She trailed off uncertainly.

"Not tired of me yet?" he asked teasingly.

"Give me another day or two. And I've really got to run. You've got my number, and door will lock automatically behind you when you're ready to go."

"I'll lock up, I'll call you later, and you're really going to be late. Go!" He made shooing gestures at her until she half-ran out the door, laughing.

❑❑❑❑❑

"I thought you liked to fly," Nick shouted over the roar of Vachon's Triumph. The other man was revving the engine, listening critically. After a moment he nodded in satisfaction and the bike's roar dropped to a low rumble.

"I do. But last night I went out riding with . . . a friend. Kind of reminded me of how much fun I used to have on this baby. Besides, by the time we get to the airport, check in, embark, fly, disembark, and get out of the airport in Quebec, it'll be nearly dawn. We get going now, we can be there long before that."

"It's nearly 600 miles!" Nick protested.

Vachon looked at him soberly. "Well, I wasn't planning on obeying the speed limits." He checked his saddlebags one last time, then settled easily into the saddle. "You up for this?" At Nick's nod he gunned the motor, sending the hog roaring out into the evening traffic.

"This is insane. I'm going on a road trip with a slacker vampire when I should be . . ." He trailed off uncertainly. Should be what? Vachon was right. The bikes would get them there nearly as quickly, and would provide easy transportation in town besides.

"Maybe I am getting old." With a sigh of weary resignation, Nick mounted his own bike and headed, far more sedately, after Vachon.

❑❑❑❑❑

WHAAAAAAANK!

The big rig howled its annoyance as Vachon, apparently bored with their sedate 80 mph, cut sharply in front of it and pealed out with a scream of protesting tires. The truck swayed alarmingly from side to side as the trucker fought to regain control, and for a minute Nick thought he'd have to follow Vachon's lead or be squashed like a grape against the center divider. Then the truck settled on one lane and he was able to slide safely out of harm's way.

The flash of a bubble light caught Nick's immediate attention. Roughly half a mile down the road officers were waving traffic into a detour around a spilled ten wheeler. Then the road curved, and he lost sight of it. If Vachon hadn't caught a glance of that . . . Nick increased his own speed, hoping to catch up with the impetuous vampire before he managed to splatter himself all over the tarmac.

The road straightened again, and sure enough, there was Vachon, headed at full speed directly toward the overturned rig. The cop in Nick guessed that he was going about 110. Vampire reflexes or not, there was no way he'd clear it. At least Vachon was old enough to know when to drop the bike and take to the skies.

Wasn't he?

Just like in the movies, cops dove for cover as the Triumph screamed by. Here, there were no stuntmen standing by, though, and Nick flinched as the bike hit the tomato-covered road. Vachon stayed with the bike, which either proved that he was very conscientious about not being seen by mortals or that he was a complete fool. Watching the bike slalom through the wreckage, Nick voted for the latter.

When the younger vampire failed to turn himself into hamburger, Nick pulled around the wreckage and followed. Still thinking up invectives for the impetuous child he'd made the mistake of following, he was alarmed to see the bike swaying from side to side. Vachon slowed the bike, then pulled over to the side of the road. As Nick pulled up behind him, he was alarmed to see Vachon stumble away from the bike and collapse bonelessly to the ground.

"Vachon!" Heedlessly letting his bike fall where it would, Nick ran to the prostrate figure. Vachon was covered in blood, holding his stomach tightly, and . . . laughing?

"Oh, man, did you see that? Whoo! I *still* can't believe it!" One red-smeared hand slapped at the road, sending to Nick a small puff of dust and the smell of tomatoes. The younger man sat up on his elbows, and grinned. "Why didn't you follow me through? That was wild, Nick!"

Nick closed his mouth with a snap. "You, you . . . you did that for fun? You could have been killed, Vachon!" He looked down at still-smiling Vachon, and in that moment he understood LaCroix in an entirely new light. Slowly, Vachon's smile faded, and he shook his head sadly.

"It *was* fun, Nick. Yeah, it was a risk. But life *is* risk, man. You stop taking chances, you start to die inside. Don't you know that?" When Nick just looked at him, Vachon sighed in exasperation. "Sometimes you've just got to take a chance. Yeah, you might crap out, but you could also end up with something better than you'd ever imagine." Vachon looked up at him intently, and seemed on the verge of adding something else. Then he shook his head, and started getting to his feet. "Forget it. I'm probably way out of line. We'd better get moving—those cops back there looked pretty pissed off." He wiped off the worst of the tomato pulp, then sauntered back to the big Triumph. Nick watched in thoughtful silence for a few seconds, then moved to join him.

❑❑❑❑❑

The moon hung low over the trees, shining its silver light down on the young lovers who walked arm-in-arm through the park. Sometimes their laughter would reach him, the soft music of innocents who had no idea of the monsters who walked among them. Cain shifted on his seat and looked back up at the moon. The light fell on his upturned face like a gentle benediction from God, and he knew it was time to begin again.

The monsters had begun to be careful. Even the stupidest beast will protect itself when threatened with death, and vampires were anything but stupid. Already they watched for strangers among them, for the pad of soft mortal feet behind them. Locks were added to doors already heavily fortified, and new lairs created that mortal city records were unaware of.

But they had grown fat and complacent in the past century. Things which might have exposed them, simple things like refusing to worship at the town chapel or staying healthy while all those around them fell ill, no longer applied in this healthy, modern civilization. Vampires and devils were the things of fiction, and few mortals still walked the earth wearing even the simple symbol of their faith. Even God, it was said, no longer existed. Now the monsters were free to flaunt their difference to a city which had seen far, far more eccentric behavior. Now they fed off mortal society like leeches, with no natural predators to keep them in check.

Except Cain. He knew what they were, knew what an abomination Satan had let loose upon God's earth. At first he had faltered, led astray by their too-human features, the piteous way some would beg for their cursed unlives. But God had shown him the truth. He had been chosen, and he would not fail. He would not rest until the last of them was destroyed, wiping their filth from the face of God's good earth forever.

And even now he was blessed. Even now his prey grew closer. The warming sun was only a short while away, and like any beast, the vampire would soon go to ground. All Cain must do now was wait. A moment later she passed him. She had been a remarkable beauty as a mortal, he had no doubt, but now all Cain could see was the filth which lay just below that lacquered surface. Glancing apprehensively around her, the vampire unlocked the door and slipped inside the door marked "Service Entrance: Employees Only." It shut with a soft thud behind her, and she disappeared down into the tunnels below the city. He shook his head in disgust. Even now they did not understand how predictable they had become. With a low sigh he lifted his tired old body up from the bench, gathered his equipment about him, and followed.

❑❑❑❑❑

Natalie Lambert was having the nicest dream. In it, she was walking though a field of poppies, the sun shining gently down from above. That was all. No corpses. No phones. No smell of formaldehyde or coagulating blood. Just warm, fresh air, with birds singing in the trees for Sidney to chase. Then Nick was there, and it got even better. He'd dressed nicely for her dream, and considerately took off his sunglasses as he approached. Smiling, he reached out and took her hand, and said,

"Natalie? It's Nick. Something's come up, and . . ."

Oh, he was making excuses again. Drat the man, anyway. His voice sounded awfully tinny, though.

". . . I'll call you as soon as I get back. Take care."

Then he was gone. Weird. But it was okay, because then the Von Trapp walked over the hill, and soon she was singing along with them as they walked down the hill to Disneyland.

❑❑❑❑❑

"When you wish upon a star . . ." Tracy had been humming the tune for half an hour, and she was profoundly sick of it. She'd already tried mentally reciting prime numbers, the Toronto Civil Code, and the name of every teacher she'd had since she was five, but nothing had helped. Now she was singing it aloud, God help her. At least it kept her from thinking about last night. She'd *never* get any work done if that happened. At least Nick wasn't here. She could keep a secret from the rest of the station, but she knew he'd have peeled it out of her in a flash. Vachon had said that wouldn't be a good idea, but she'd never gotten around to asking him why.

She'd been a little distracted at the time.

Taking a new lover was a big deal, of course, and it was only reasonable that she'd still be thinking about it the next day. Who wouldn't? Add to that that the man in question was a tall, dark, and handsome *vampire*, and things got even more complicated.

It sure hadn't seemed complicated last night. He'd been sweet and gentle, and everything had happened with a *rightness* that was almost scary in its intensity. The bite, when it finally came, hadn't even hurt. Quite the contrary, in fact. Add to that the feel of his cool, knowing hands on her bare skin and the way he'd whispered her name when he—

"Tracy Vetter, what *were* you up to last night?"

"Wha—what?" She looked up from her daydreaming to see Grace Murphy, the night desk sergeant, perched casually on the edge of her desk. Grace was looking down at her with a knowing smile on her narrow face, and Tracy felt her face turn fire-engine red.

"Oh, don't you 'what' me, girl. When Detective Vetter, who's *always* on time, comes in a full hour late wearing a turtleneck sweater and a glow that lights up half the damn station, there most certainly is something going on. Who is it? Come on, honey, you can tell Grace."

"There's nothing to tell," Tracy managed, averting her eyes from Grace's knowing stare. Grace was Metro's most renowned gossip hound, and it was said she could read good dirt right out of your head. "I was . . . just out with an old friend."

"Well, then you'd better just give me his number right now. Anybody who has that kind of affect on a 'friend' is a national resource, and ought to be properly treasured."

"No! I mean, he's more than a friend. Someone that I've known for quite a while." Grace clearly wasn't having any of it. "Okay, he's my boyfriend. Enough?"

"Not on your life. Does this stud boy have a name? Better yet, give me his brother's name. We'll open a franchise."

Tracy burst out laughing.

"His name's Javier, and he doesn't have any brothers.

You'll just have to settle for poor old Joel, Grace." Joel was Grace's on-again, off-again boyfriend, whose every foible was well known throughout the station. Grace wrinkled her nose in response.

"Never go with last year's model. You sure we couldn't work out some sort of time-sharing agreement? No? Well, you let me know if you change your mind." She looked down at her watch, and jumped off the desk. "Whoops! I'd better get back to work. Now, you tell that stud of yours I said he'd better let you get a little sleep next time. You're looking a little pale, blondie." Before Tracy could come up with any sort of dignified reply Grave had sauntered off.

Now that Grace mentioned it, she *was* feeling a little pale. She'd always had a small hypoglycemic problem, which was aggravated by stress. Normally, it just made her a little light-headed if she skipped a meal, but once or twice, when she'd skipped too many meals, it had made her pass out. It was really embarrassing—not to mention dangerous, if it should happen in the field—and now she was very careful to avoid missing a single meal. Maybe her little "blood donation" last night was having the same affect. Stomach rumbling, she checked the time and saw that it was almost lunch time. Sliding her papers into her desk, she went off to brave the all-night burger joint across the street.

❑❑❑❑❑

The cool night air felt wonderful after the stale, processed air of the Coroner's Building. Natalie stretched her arms luxuriously over her head, then set out at a good pace for Jimmee's. Word was that Jimmee's was always on the verge of a health department shutdown, but boy, did they know how to make a chili-cheese burger! She pushed through the glass door and headed purposefully for the counter.

"I'll have a chili-cheese special with onion rings and large Coke. Oh! And a chocolate milkshake." Sidney wouldn't mind a belch or two later tonight. She handed over her money, careful to avert her eyes from the kitchen while she did so. *What you don't know won't hurt you, right?*

Carrying her tray 'o cholesterol, Natalie turned around carefully and nearly ran into a familiar face.

"Tracy! Hey, don't see you out here too often. I thought you were more of a salad person."

"Well, you know how it is. I just got a big craving for one of Jimmee's monster burgers." Tracy shrugged casually. Nat waited while the detective ordered her own poison, and they managed to find a small table that would fit both of them.

"You sure seem chipper tonight. Have a good time last night?"

"Am I wearing a sign or something?" Tracy dropped her sandwich and stared wide-eyed across at Nat.

Natalie laughed. "No, but I know it was your night off, and you *do* look a little more chipper than usual." The blonde detective did look happy. Happy and preoccupied, the way Nat hadn't felt since, well . . . a long time. "Anyone I know?"

Vachon had said she shouldn't mention it to Nick, but Natalie already knew that she and Javier were seeing each other. "Yes. It's Vachon. You remember, he helped out with the Vudu case last year."

"Yeah, I remember. I didn't know it was that serious." Vachon. The vampire. If the two of them were "involved", then they were in the same boat as she and Nick. Funny, Tracy sure didn't *look* frustrated . . . Tracy took a big bite of her burger, then leaned forward confidentially.

"Neither did I. Until last night, I mean. You know how sometimes everything just seems so right? Well, it was *very* right last night." A delicate pink flush rose on her pale cheeks as she spoke.

Pale cheeks. Paler than normal, with salad-loving Tracy enthusiastically chomping down on a double-decker hamburger. While wearing a turtleneck with a high, concealing collar.

"And, you and Javier . . ." Nat broke off, unsure of how to proceed. Tracy didn't know that she knew that Vachon was a vampire. And it was a damned personal thing to ask, anyway. Tracy had put down her sandwich and was looking at her expectantly.

"You think it's going to work out?" she finished lamely.

"I hope so. I mean, I think so. We're really different in some ways, but maybe that's good. We complement each other. Are you okay, Natalie?"

"Yeah. I was just preoccupied for a minute. Say, have you talked to Nick today?" Nick would sort this out when he got back. Whenever he got back.

"I saw him briefly this morning. He said he was taking some personal time. Something about family trouble."

"That's all he told me, too. My answering machine, anyway. I was hoping he'd told you where he could be reached. It's not like him to go off on his own like that." Good, back on safe ground now.

"Not unless it involves police business. I swear, sometimes I think I need to put a leash on him. If he calls in, do you want me to let him know you're looking for him?"

Poor Natalie, left in the lurch again.

"No, you don't have to bother. I'm sure he'll call when he can." They gathered up the remains of their midnight lunch, and headed toward the door.

❑❑❑❑❑

"Well, hello there. You boys looking for a good time?" The woman in front of them was attractive and only slightly tipsy, and possessed the most amazing set of . . . assets that Vachon had ever seen. She was also mortal, and he shook his head.

"Not tonight. We're looking for an old friend. Maybe you could help us?" He raised his eyebrows in supplication, and she slid smoothly into his lap. Beside him, Nick was doing his best not to look embarrassed.

"Maybe. But I could show you a much better time than an old 'friend'." She was playing with a strand of his long brown hair while she leaned forward, giving him a full demonstration of her undeniable appeal. He shook his head again, and gently took her hand in his.

"She's a very special friend. Long, red hair, green eyes, about your height. Most people call her Rose. You seen her

lately?" She dropped her eyes in mock coquettishness, and he felt a flash of physical hunger run through him which faded as quickly as it had appeared. Not desire, though, and she was certainly his type. Weird. Back to business, Javier. He pushed gently at her mind.

"You've seen her, haven't you? Tell me where." Her eyelids flickered slightly in surprise, and when she answered it was with the slow, thoughtful cadence of a controlled mortal.

"Yeah, I've seen her here. She used to come in two, three times a week. But I haven't seen her around lately."

"When was the last time? Think hard, Julie."

"Ummm, Saturday, I think. Yeah, she was talking to this old guy. It wasn't a party kind of thing, more like maybe he was her uncle or something, you know? That was the last time I saw her. Maybe she went down to the Aladdin, I don't know . . ." His question answered, she stared blankly out at the bar, waiting for whatever came next. Nick leaned over, and gently pried the location of the Aladdin out of her, and made sure that she didn't know anything more. Apparently he'd had a lot of practice at it, for the whole procedure took less than a minute before she was wandering away, the two of them already forgotten.

❑❑❑❑❑

"You're sure that was the place?" Nick looked skeptically at Vachon as the two of them left the downtown dive where they'd met the informative Julie. There hadn't been a single vampire there, even though the place was clearly popular with the locals.

"Well, it has been a couple of years, but it used to be. And Rose was there less than a week ago. She's never had a big fondness for mortals, so I kind of doubt she'd be there alone."

They headed down the narrow alley that Vachon said would lead directly to the Aladdin. Suddenly the hair at the nape of Nick's neck rose up.

"We're not—" He didn't have time to finish his warning before five dark shapes materialized around them, cutting off every avenue of escape. A low growl from one of them warned against trying to escape.

". . . alone anymore," Vachon finished quietly.

"Friends of yours?"

"Nope."

Nick glanced over at Vachon, then forced a grin.

"Well, at least we found what we were looking for."

❑❑❑❑❑

Midnight had already come and gone, and with it most of the civilians who frequented the bars in this seedy part of town. Their five "escorts" led Nick and Vachon down a bewildering series of half-empty streets and dank alleys, unseen by the few mortal eyes which remained. They spoke little, and then in a French dialect which had been extinct for a century or more.

They were vampires, of course. But different, somehow. It took Nick several minutes to realize what it was: they were frightened. Badly frightened, and wired to react with lethal force to the slightest provocation. One of them kept a careful watch behind them as they moved silently through the back streets and rooftops, keeping a pace which would ensure that no mortal could follow.

"Here." The whisper was loud enough only for vampire hearing. One of the men landed lightly on the top of an abandoned plant in the city's industrial area and walked quickly to a large, open chimney. With a final glance around him, he dropped silently into the black pit and was gone. One of the others gestured to Nick and Vachon. The two of them shared a last look, then Vachon stepped forward and dropped into the darkness below.

❑❑❑❑❑

He didn't call.

Natalie tossed her green scrubs in the general direction of the waste bin and ran a hand through her tangled long brown hair. She was alone. Grace had left early, saying something about a hot date, and business had been so dead that Nat could scarcely blame her. From one standpoint, having business be slow at the coroner's was a good thing: Toronto could use a few more nights like this one. From another, it made for one *heck* of a long night. A night without *her* Knight. She'd spent the day expecting his call. It just wasn't like Nick to drop off the face of the earth like this . . .

Or maybe it was. Natalie pulled on her coat and headed for the door, her face set with worry for Nick and annoyance with herself. Nick was moody, given to highs and lows which frequently took her breath away. Usually he'd stay away for a few hours or a day, then call or show up with a half dozen daisies and a smile. Nonetheless, her traitorous mind kept reminding her of how close he'd come to simply packing up and leaving just after Schanke's death last fall. It had been only good fortune that she'd arrived when she did: another hour or two and she might have missed him.

And she would miss him. Nick could be frustrating, infuriating, and even frightening, but he was all she wanted. Easy enough to admit it now, when she was alone. It was harder to admit when they were together, when he was so much *there*, man and vampire both. She didn't think he was even aware of his affect on women, on her. Sometimes . . . sometimes it seemed as if he *must* be, as if he returned every bit of the love she felt for him. Then the next week, or the next night, she was demoted to Loyal Human Friend—or Pet?—someone who might give him the cure he'd been searching for for centuries. Recently, she'd been entertaining daydreams about tying him down and tickling him until he admitted the truth one way or the other. It was an amusing thought, and she smiled to herself until she caught herself at it. She was mad at him right now, and risque thoughts about what else she might do with him under those circumstances would have to wait. Sooner or later he'd stroll back into her life, and this time she'd let him have it.

With both barrels.

❑❑❑❑❑

He hadn't called.

Tracy tossed her coat at the coat rack near the door, and watched as it missed by a mile. It didn't seem worth picking up just now. Across the room, the answering machine stared mockingly at her, its one red eye gleaming steadily. No messages, and the apartment had that "nobody home" feeling it always did when she first arrived. Sliding her shoulder holster off and leaving it on the kitchen table, she headed for a beer.

Of course he didn't have a phone, she reminded herself. And he wasn't the most stable of people, anyway. Vachon was probably out tearing up the road on his bike, or drinking blood out of crystal glasses at the Raven.

Still. Ignoring the sink full of dirty dishes—and the memories they triggered—Tracy tugged off her sweater and headed for the bedroom. He could have at least called. It wasn't like she was expected them to be suddenly attached to the hip or anything. Just a phone call, or a note. Half-hoping, she looked down at her pillow.

No note. Just a rumpled, unmade bed complete with a few small drops of blood on her pillow. Not a lot, but a reminder of what they'd shared last night. Or of what she'd thought they'd shared. Apparently it hadn't meant the same thing to Vachon. She punched the offending pillow, then began to methodically strip the bed. If your pillowcase offends you, punch it out.

Then wash it, make the bed, and pretend you haven't made a huge mistake.

❑❑❑❑❑

The chimney had been modified, and nothing broke the unrelenting darkness as he plunged further and further down it. Of course, the fall wasn't really a concern, but the narrowness of the brick passage prevented Vachon from properly controlling his descent, which left him feeling uneasy. It was too much like last September, when he'd been trapped in a mortal plane which rushed headlong towards the earth below. Nothing like a little enforced helplessness to make a guy feel cheerful.

At last the comforting glow of candlelight reached him, and Vachon landed easily on cold stone. A sound from above reminded him to step aside, and a moment later Nick was beside him.

The room they were in was immense. Candles in wrought-iron holders covered with centuries of wax were placed sporadically throughout the room, providing enough light for the eyes of a vampire, but which would undoubtedly seem pitifully inadequate to a mortal. What might have been some sort of underground train station decades ago was now clearly home to a dozen or more vampires, all of whom milled restlessly about, watching him and Nick carefully. No one spoke, and their five escorts faded into the background, leaving them to fend for themselves. None of the dark-garbed men and women in the room were familiar to Vachon. Dressed in modern clothes, they nonetheless gave off an aura of centuries of breeding, culture, and *stillness*. Not the type he'd normally hang around with. Maybe Nick . . . ? A glance to the right told him Nick was as lost as he was. The silence was starting to weigh too heavy on him.

"Gosh, I hate it when I underdress for a party. And a pretty wild one it is, I might add. You guys been taking formaldehyde with your blood?" He knew he was probably digging them in deeper, but what the hell. You only live twice, and maybe a little shaking up would loosen their tongues. It seemed to be working. Three of them turned glowing amber eyes at him, and the tallest of them took a step forward.

"Look, we're just looking for friends of ours." Nick, of course. Making peace before things got interesting. "Janette du Champ and Louis Montecalm. We think that they might have been here recently. All we want is—"

"We know what you want." A clear, bell-like voice cut him off, and both of them wheeled in surprise toward the sound. Standing calmly not two yards from them was a tiny creature in a pale, filmy dress and masses of wavy blond hair. She looked to be about six years old, until you got a look at her eyes.

"We have been aware of you since you first arrived in our city yesterday. When you did not come to pay your respects to our master, we came to you." Her voice was childlike in its piping quality, but Vachon knew an elder when he heard one.

"Merrault?" he ventured. She shook her head dismissively.

"A child, if a useful one. No, our master is far older and far, far more powerful. And he does not like uninvited guests. Especially now."

"Yes. We're aware of the trouble you've been having." In spite of everything, it was funny watching Nick treat this slip of a girl with the same courtesy he accorded LaCroix. The detective continued gamely, "That is what brings us here. News of the burning of the Etude reached us in Toronto, and we have reason to believe that Janette and Louis may have been there when it happened." The slight tremor in his voice when he said Janette's name confirmed Vachon's suspicions. Whatever had happened between them, he was still holding a torch for her. The girl shrugged infinitesimally, then turned her head to ask a question of the group in a language Vachon couldn't begin to identify. An equally mysterious reply, and she returned her sober attention to them.

"The one calling himself Montecalm was among those of the Community we lost at the Etude. I am sorry that we could not bring you better news at the end of your journey."

"Who?" Vachon forced the word out past the lump in his throat. *Ah, Louis. Guess we'll never drink to your fourth century now. And you were so close.*

"If we knew, there would not *be* a problem." The asperity in her voice brought him back to the present with a start. "We have not yet been able to locate the Hunter."

"What about Janette?" Apparently Nick had less than a burning interest in the problems of the Quebec Community just now. "I know that she was here, and she had almost certainly been to the Etude. I need to know if she is still here, or if she is . . . gone. She is very dear to me." Nick's voice was a combination of the cop and the grieving lover. There was another soft conversation, this time in the same ancient French they'd heard before.

"No." The child-elder shook her head sadly. "A woman

calling herself only Janette was here some short time ago. But she was very sad, very confused. We were not certain of what brought her to the state she was in. Even my master was at a loss. In many ways she was a lost child, uncertain of where to turn."

"But she left before the fire?" The hope in his voice was unmistakable.

"We believe so. She has not been among us for several days now. Of course, it may be that she has met with the Hunter who plagues us and is yet undiscovered. More than that I cannot tell you."

"What about this Hunter?" If you can't save your friends, avenge them.

"All we know is that he is a man of great strength, for a human, and that he knows us, our habits and our hideaways. Including all of those he butchered at the Etude, we have lost nineteen of our people—nearly half of a Community which had remained unchanging for more than a century." For the first time, her direct gaze left their faces, and she casually studied her fingernails. "More than that we cannot say."

"There's something else, isn't there?" Vachon said, taking a shot in the dark. "You know something else about this guy. Why are you trying to hide it?" Exasperation at her reluctance made his voice challenging, and she looked up in response.

"Because it is none of your affair. Your friend is dead. Take yourself away from here, Javier Vachon. Trouble has always followed you, and we have enough on our plate as it is."

He shook his head. "That's over now. And you haven't answered my question." The small vampire looked up at him grimly.

"It is something which we do not care to share with outsiders. However, if it will induce you to leave us to our business, I will explain.

"The papers have only mentioned the Etude. What they do not say is that we are being picked off by an enemy who knows us as well as we know ourselves. Our most intimate habits are known to him, our most secret places. Never in my two thousand years have I seen such precision, such lack of doubt or error. The conclusion we have reached is inescapable. Our Hunter has an assistant.

"He is aided by one of our own."

There was a long second of silence, as Nick and Vachon took in the elder vampire's words. *He is aided by one of our own.* Nick shook his head in disbelief.

"There must be another explanation. No vampire would turn another over to a Hunter. To do that would break the Code, and turn every other vampire against him."

"Only if he were caught." The small, child-like vampire raised one eyebrow. "And of course, no one *ever* goes against the Code, do they, Nicholas?" Her look was bland, but Nick would have sworn that she was baiting him. *What does she know?* Beside him, Vachon was giving her his best wide-eyed stare of innocence. Tracy, of course. Vachon had done a little code-breaking on his own, when he let Tracy discover their existence. The girl continued, apparently oblivious.

"In any case, as I said, it is our concern." She nodded slightly, and three of the other vampires in the room moved smoothly toward her. "Your business here is done. My people will see you to your hotel room now. At dusk tomorrow, you will return to Toronto. Do you understand?"

"Wait a minute! Louis was a friend of mine. I'm not letting go of this just because we offend your delicate sensibilities." Vachon's face was set and determined, with that the-hell-with-you-if you-disagree look that Nick had seen only once or twice before. While it was nice to see him standing up for a belief—any belief—now was probably not the best time.

"At least let us speak to your master. We have police connections he might find useful in this case." Nick took a step forward, gesturing with one hand for Vachon to lay off. "Where can we find him?"

"You can't. He sees few of us anymore. My master may well be the oldest of us all, and of late has little interest in the day-to-day world. I will relay your offer to him this evening, but I can tell you now that he will decline it. Our insular Community has done well on its own for better than a hundred years. We need no outsiders to solve our problems for us." The little vampire nodded dismissively. "You may go now."

"Just like that?" Vachon's voice was loud in the sudden silence. The Spaniard took a step toward the elder vampire and in response the three behind her moved forward. Nick grabbed Vachon's arm firmly and leaned forward to whisper in his ear.

"Just like that. Let's go." Vachon looked rebelliously at him for a moment, then dropped his eyes.

"This is the last time I play tour guide for you, Knight. Okay, boys, lead the way." They followed the silent three Quebec vampires back up the way they had come, the elder vampire watching impassively as they left.

❑❑❑❑❑

The hotel door shut behind them with a soft click, and they were alone. The cool, processed air and bland, comfortable furnishings were a pleasant change, as was the absence of their silently disapproving escorts. Vachon headed immediately for one of the beds, and flopped gracelessly down on it.

"So. What's the plan?"

"Plan?" Nick sat down at the table near the balcony and looked back at him innocently. A little turnabout was only fair, after all the "who me?" looks he'd suffered from Vachon in the past.

"Yeah. The plan, Knight. You can't tell me you're letting them herd us out like last week's fish."

"Probably not," he agreed. "But it was pretty clear that the elder wasn't going to help us. Tomorrow night we pay a visit to the master of this city. I think we can persuade him to accept our help. For now, I'd suggest we get some sleep. The sun will be up pretty soon. We're not going to get much done once that happens."

Vachon stretched and looked up at the ceiling. "Yeah. Oh, shoot." He sat up with a jerk, and rubbed ruefully at the back of his neck. "I forgot. Listen, I'm going down to the lobby for a second. You want anything?"

"Going to visit the snack shop?" Nick asked innocently. Vachon was up to something, that much was clear. But what?

"No. I . . . just need to make a phone call."

"Phone's right here." Nick gestured toward the phone at

the table.

"Yeah, well, this is kind of personal. I tried to call last night, couldn't get through. I'll probably catch hell for it, and I'd just as soon do my crow-eating in private, if you catch my drift?" Vachon looked uncomfortable and bemused at the same time.

"Women." Nick grinned, and shook his head. "Why don't I go down to the lobby and get today's paper? Might take me ten or fifteen minutes. You think that would give you enough time?"

"Man, I hope so. If it doesn't, I might as well not bother going back at all." He sighed, and flopped back down on the bed. "Five hundred years, and I still don't understand women."

"Eight hundred years, and I don't have a clue." Nick scooped up the hotel key and headed toward the door. "Good luck."

❑❑❑❑❑

"Oh, how could you?" Tracy scowled down at him, ignoring the innocent look in his round, dark eyes. With a sigh of frustration, she lifted Fluffy the iguana off the small telephone table and held him at eye level. "Why can't you find somewhere else to sleep?" Fluffy flicked his tongue out at her, prudently choosing to remain silent.

Setting the receiver back on the hook, Tracy dumped the iguana unceremoniously back into his aquarium. That made two days in a row that the big lizard had decided to sleep on the telephone table, which sat directly under the window. The dark wood held the day's heat nicely, he'd discovered, which wouldn't have been a problem if the table had been bigger or he a little smaller. As it was, Fluffy had twice now bumped the telephone, knocking the receiver just slightly off the hook.

Which, incidentally, let Vachon off the hook quite nicely. Whistling cheerfully, Tracy headed for the door, yesterday's sop of self-pity entirely forgotten.

Well, almost. He'd better call today, or her favorite Spaniard was going to have a problem one heck of a lot bigger than a little sunlight. She shut the door, and headed for work.

❑❑❑❑❑

Ring. Ring. Ring.

The telephone rang loudly in her empty apartment.

"Hi. This is Tracy. I can't come to the phone right now. Leave a message after the beep."

"Tracy? It's Javier. Pick up the phone. Trace? Listen, I tried to call you yesterday, but your line was busy. Something important came up, and I had to go out of town unexpectedly. I'll probably be back in a couple of days. Take care of yourself, okay?

"Nick, give me a minute, will ya? Listen, I've got to go. I'll call you ton—hey, Nick, give it a rest, would y—"

A sound like a snarl, followed by a heavy thump. The hiss of the tape continued for a moment, then was followed by the sound of the receiver being gently replaced. The loud, bland sound of the dial tone echoed through the room, then the answering machine clicked off with a satisfied beep. From his cage, Fluffy watched the small red light blink with interest.

❑❑❑❑❑

"He's done it again, hasn't he?"

Tracy blinked and looked up from her half-doze. Grace was perched on the edge of her desk, an all-too-knowing smirk on her face. "That stud-boy of yours kept you up all night again, didn't he? He must be something else if you've gotta come to work to get some sleep." As usual, Grace's voice carried far enough to be heard by the entire room, and several of the day shift turned to get a better view.

"Grace! No, it's nothing like that. I just couldn't sleep, and decided I'd catch up on my paperwork. If that's all right with you." It must have come out harsher than she'd intended. Grace shrugged, patted her on the shoulder, and sauntered off. *Maybe I should go home. I'm not going to get much done here.* She rubbed at her forehead, then stifled a huge yawn. When she'd gotten off shift a few hours ago, she'd been upset to discover that Javier hadn't called. Not that he had to, she firmly reminded herself. Still, it had been enough to disrupt her sleep, and it wasn't until she was going out the door a couple of hours later that she realized that Fluffy had knocked the phone off the hook again. Vachon was temporarily reprieved.

Reaching for the phone, Tracy dialed her home number. Dad was supposed to call about Easter Sunday. Maybe he'd finally gotten the hint and stopped calling her at work. The answering machine picked up, and she punched in her access code. There certainly wasn't any other reason to check her messages . . .

Fifteen seconds later she was bolting for the door.

❑❑❑❑❑

"You can't be serious." Natalie watched with trepidation as Tracy haphazardly tossed clothing in the direction of her open suitcase. "All we know is that Nick and presumably Vachon were checking out an arson report in Quebec City. We don't even know if that's where they went!"

"Look, I told you. Nick was in on our day off with someone who matches Javier's description. He made some inquiries into a fire in Quebec the night after I saw Vachon reading a French-language newspaper. It doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure out that Nick was helping Vachon with some problem up there."

"But why would Nick get involved?" Natalie could think of at least one good reason, but Tracy wouldn't know about that. As hard as he tried to regain his mortality, Nick had never been able to cut his ties to the vampire community. "Family" business, indeed. Tracy tossed a couple of extra clips of ammunition into the suitcase, then began to try to squeeze the overstuffed bag shut.

"Look, Natalie, don't insult my intelligence. My partner, who I'm supposed to trust with my life, has been keeping one whopper of a secret from me. You're his *doctor*. You know what I'm talking about."

"Secret?" Nat tried vainly. *Oh, Nick, I warned you about this . . .*

"Sure. It's kind of fitting, really. I'll bet a lot of vampires have coroners for family physicians." She snapped the suitcase shut, and looked levelly at Natalie. "Can we cut the bullshit, now? I figured it out. The joke's over."

"It wasn't meant to be a joke." Natalie walked over and sat on the bed next to Tracy. "Nick was just trying to protect you, Tracy."

"From what?" she practically exploded. "I already know about vampires, okay? My boyfriend's one, for Pete's sake!" She sighed, and began to rub her temples. "I'm sorry, Natalie. This isn't your fault. I guess I'm just worried. Something came after Javier, something that he and Nick couldn't see or stop. I thought it was just about impossible to sneak up on these guys."

"It is. I don't know what could have happened. But they've both been around a long time, Trace. They know how to take care of themselves." Nat could hear the uncertainty in her own voice. Nick had gotten himself out of some pretty sticky situations before without any help from her, she knew that. Still, a small voice in the back of her mind kept whispering. *What about this time? If he was okay, wouldn't he have called by now? Especially if something had happened to Vachon?* And something had almost certainly happened to the young Spanish vampire. Tracy's answering machine told them that much.

"You're probably right. And I'm probably going to make a big fool out of myself when it turns out to be nothing." Tracy smiled half-heartedly, then shrugged. "I just have to know. Look, would you come check on Fluffy while I'm gone? He won't bite, I promise."

"Nope. But I will tell my pet-sitter to look in on him." *What the hell. Nick's not the only one who can play white knight.* "I'm coming with you."

❑❑❑❑❑

A voice came through the thick fog, punctuated by blinding bolts of pain.

"Thank you, oh my Lord—" *thump* "—for delivering Your enemies into Your servant's—" *thump* "—unworthy hands. With these gifts I shall have—" *thump* "—the strength to finish Your work in this unclean city." A last *thump*, and Vachon greyed out.

When the fog thinned again he found himself lying on a cold stone floor, his arms bound tightly behind him. His head throbbed mercilessly, and a haze of colored smoke seemed to surround everything around him. Nick was nowhere to be seen. From out of the fog Vachon could hear footsteps approaching. Closing his eyes to slits, he watched as a pair of black-clad legs walked past him to stop at a table at the edge of his vision. Something about the white cloth which covered the table and the sober clothing of his captor rang a bell, but it wasn't until he smelled the incense and heard the Latin chant begin that he realized what was happening.

His captor was a priest, and this was the Mass for the Dead.

❑❑❑❑❑

"Oh, God."

"Easy, Tracy. It's not as bad as it looks." Despite her brave words, Natalie had to wonder. Pulling the police tape from the door, she stepped into the hotel room with a forced, professional calm. Blood was spattered on one wall between the room's double beds and coated a shattered lamp which lay nearby in a circle of white chalk. Small marks around the room indicated that Quebec forensics had already come and gone, taking with them any personal effects which had been left in this broken room. Stepping carefully around the maroon stain on the carpet near the door, she cautiously began to explore. "Doesn't look like there was much of a struggle. Is there any mention of a weapon in the police report?"

Tracy looked down at the Xerox copy of the initial police report. "Nothing. They found traces of—" She faltered, then went on, "traces of blood and hair on the lamp, but it says here that it was probably done during the struggle. Before the samples disappeared, the lab had reported that there were two different blood types present, but they weren't able to identify them." They exchanged a grim look. Of course the lab wouldn't recognize vampire blood. Natalie could have, if the samples hadn't mysteriously "disappeared" along with the computerized report almost as soon as it had been filed. It had been only luck that the detective in charge had been holding onto the hard copy, and that they'd been pointed in his direction when they appeared at the downtown Quebec police station.

"Look, they may have gotten out on their own." Natalie rubbed her hands together and looked around the room again. There might be something else here, but it was damned hard to keep the clinical detachment she'd need to see it. From the looks of things, Tracy wasn't doing much better. "There's no sign of anyone being dragged out of here. Maybe they both got away." Even before Tracy began to shake her head, Natalie knew it wouldn't hold up.

"They would have called. And besides, look at these impressions." She bent down in the doorway to get a closer look at the footprint outlined in blood. "This looks like someone carrying a heavy load. See how the front part of the shoe is—"

Natalie looked up from the lampshade she'd been examining. "I'm sorry, Tracy, what were you—" She stopped in mid-sentence as something moved with a blur of speed across the room toward her. Nat just had time to think *"Vampires. Got to—"* before a cold, hard hand settled around her wrist, twisting her arm painfully behind her. Tracy was already pinned, her free hand moving toward her holstered gun. Another blur of speed, and the weapon thumped to the floor across the room.

"Well, well, well. Didn't quite finish the job last time? Or did you ladies just come to gloat?" The tall, lean figure which held Natalie spoke mockingly, his icy breath just inches away from her exposed throat.

Oh, we are in so much trouble. They hadn't even considered the reaction of the local vampire community to the attack on Nick and Vachon. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!* Nat berated herself. *How are we ever going to talk our way out of this?* Across the room, she saw the other vampire dip his head tauntingly toward Tracy's neck.

"Cat got your tongue? Ah, well. At least he left us the best part. Don't worry, little girl. We'll be much more merciful than you ever were." He bared his fangs. Natalie took a deep breath, but before she could utter a sound a cold hand pressed itself firmly over her mouth and nose. She could see Tracy struggling futilely in the vampire's powerful grip. He moved lower, his fangs clearly visible in the room's bright light.

Then he stopped.

"What's this?" He pulled Tracy's sweater down, baring her throat completely. "Someone's been at this one already. What's the matter, girl? Didn't like your taste of the wild side?"

"Somebody's been sipping instead of taking a proper draft," his partner replied. "Guess that'll learn 'em, eh?" He chuckled, and Natalie felt her knees go weak. This casual cruelty frightened her more than anything she'd ever felt. Even LaCroix—or so she thought she remembered, through the haze of wine and hypnotic command—hadn't had this casual contempt for human life. Tracy was very pale, but when she spoke her voice was strong and clear.

"Wait! It's not like that!" She struggled briefly to turn and face him, then subsided. "We're here looking for them, that's true. But we're trying to help!"

"Mortals helping vampires?" he sneered.

"Mayhap she's his thrall," Nat's captor added. "That'd explain why the silly git doesn't even have a pointed stick." He loosened his grip slightly, and Natalie greedily gulped in gasps of air and watched in revulsion as the other vampire licked sensuously at Tracy's exposed skin. He looked up and shook his head.

"No. Tasty, though. Whoever he was, he had good taste." He grinned through a mouthful of teeth. "So to speak. Right, girl. Let's just get this—"

"Wait!" Tracy tried again. "He's my boyfriend. Javier Vachon. He's one of the men who was staying here! I'm just trying to find out what happened to him. Look, if you know where he is—"

"We don't," he interrupted coldly. "Like as not he's as dead as the rest of them. But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you, Miss He's-my-boyfriend?"

"Blighter could've been stringing her along. More fun when they finally realize you're gonna drain 'em. Everybody thinks they're special. 'Oh, he'd never lay a finger on *me*'," the other vampire added mincingly. "Is that what you thought as well, beautiful lady?" The last was directed at Nat, and she shuddered as she felt his playful nip on her bare neck.

"No. Nick is my friend," Natalie managed calmly. "We've known each other for six years. When I heard that he might be in trouble, I came to see if I could help. If you don't believe me, look in the case." She gestured with her chin at the insulated container she'd left by the door. Both men looked at it for a moment, then Tracy's captor shoved her across the room with terrifying ease. A second later he was opening the container and pulling out one of the bags inside. Eyebrows raised in surprise, he carefully broke the seal and dipped one long finger inside.

"Blood. Human blood, at that."

"Thoughtful of 'em to bring dessert."

There was a moment of silence. Tracy picked herself painfully up off the floor and began to unobtrusively look for her gun. The vampire near the door bent and picked up the police report Tracy had dropped. Scanning it quickly, he looked over at Tracy through narrowed eyes.

"You a police officer, sweetmeat? That'd be inconvenient."

Natalie's captor swore softly. "Alia'll have our heads, we pop the top off a Bobbie here. Mayhap we'd best take 'em with us."

"Take a breather home? Have you lost your wits? Our guts'd be hanging from the rafters before these sweetlings got through the door." He tossed the report aside, and began walking toward Tracy. "I say we drain 'em and dump 'em in the river. By the time the fishies get through with them, won't be enough left to point a finger our way."

"We'd blindfold 'em first, wouldn't we? Alia picks their brains, then we do 'em somewhere quiet. No sense leavin' a trail back here, is there?" The two men regarded each other in silence, then the smaller one, who had first grabbed Tracy, shrugged.

"Couldn't do any harm, I guess. All right, little girl—" He swatted casually at her hand and Tracy's gun went flying again "—let's get to it. You going to come quietly, or do we get to smack you around a bit first? I like a bit of struggle, myself. Your 'boyfriend' the same way?" Tracy flushed an angry red, but kept silent.

"We won't give you any trouble," Nat promised. *But I hope this "Alia" is a little more reasonable than you are. What have we gotten ourselves into?* There wasn't anything more to be said, and they stood quietly as the two vampires bound their eyes and hands tightly. The two men then proceeded to scour the room for any evidence that they—any of them—had been there. Five minutes later Natalie found herself flying through the air blind, helpless, and mortally afraid.

Some rescue this is turning out to be.

❑❑❑❑❑

Nick blinked, and the floating lights in front of his eyes coalesced into recognizable patterns. He was in a large, grey room which was lit only by candlelight. A stairway leading down and a large window, heavily shuttered, were the only apparent exits. He was manacled, the heavy steel shackles bound to the cement wall behind him. He gave an experimental tug.

Nothing. The manacles were clearly meant to hold someone of more than human strength. Once his head cleared and his own strength returned, he might be able to pull free. Maybe. In the meantime, he needed to know everything he could about his captor. The last thing he could remember clearly was the hotel room. Returning from the front desk, he'd noticed that the door to the room he was sharing with Vachon was ajar. Senses fully alert, he'd pushed the door open quietly. Then there had been a blur of inhuman speed and something hard and unyielding—*Wood. It must have been wood to hurt the way it had*—had slammed against the side of his head. He could vaguely remember voices and some sort of car ride, but

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nothing more.

Extending his vampire hearing to the utmost, he could faintly hear a voice somewhere else in the building. The cadences sounded familiar. And was that Latin? Surely not. He shook his head carefully to clear it. The voice, if that was indeed what he'd heard, had stopped. Dimly, he picked up footsteps on wood, getting closer. Quickly he looked around the barren room for a weapon, any weapon. The only furnishing was a small wooden table covered with a white cloth, on which rested a leather-covered book. From here it was impossible to see the title. Vachon was nowhere to be seen. Carefully, Nick pulled himself upright. The room swayed to and fro for a moment, then steadied itself.

"Ah. You're awake. Good." A slender, boyish figure had appeared in front of him, a bottle and glass on a tray in one hand. His still-befuddled mind tried to murmur a warning, but it wasn't necessary. Even in his condition, Nick recognized a priest when he saw one. He nodded cautiously at the young man, who smiled in return.

"I've brought you something. I'm afraid it's not as fresh as I'd like, but it was the best I could do on such short notice." He set the tray on the small wooden table, and poured a generous portion into the glass. Sniffing it experimentally, he shuddered and held it out to Nick. "Go ahead. Take it. I can assure you, I wouldn't poison a guest in my home. Even an unwilling one."

Nick could just reach the glass. Tentatively, he brought it to his nose. Blood. Cow's blood, by the smell, and not too old. He looked up at the young priest in surprise.

"I don't understand."

"I'm afraid you took quite a thumping. Unavoidable, but still unfortunate. I'm very much looking forward to speaking at length with you, Nicholas, but I can't very well do that if you're too weak to speak, can I?" He smiled again and shrugged modestly. "I can tell this is what you're used to, and frankly, that's the only reason you're here, instead of cooling your heels downstairs with the other one."

Something wasn't right. *Something more than being captured by a priest? One who knows who and <u>what</u> you are? Really, Nicholas, how much more alarming could it be?* LaCroix's dry voice sounded clearly in his head. But there was *something* . . .

"The other one? You mean Vachon? The one who was with me?"

The priest nodded.

"Oh, yes. I have prayed over him, to no avail. Young Vachon is quite beyond my help, I'm afraid. Perhaps God will deal more mercifully with him than he has with his victims. The Bible teaches us that God can forgive any sin, you see, but sometimes the necessary penance is more than the body can bear.

"Or at least I have always found it to be so." From beneath the table the priest drew out a wooden stool and settled himself comfortably on it. "But I didn't come here to discuss one who is already lost to us. Come, Nicholas. It is so rare for me to find a kindred soul. Please indulge an old man for a few hours." He gestured to the floor at Nick's feet and Nick sank down without a word of protest.

Kindred soul? Indulge an old man? Clearly, the young priest was insane. Shaking his head again to clear it, Nick looked at the small, neat figure seated before him. The vestments, he saw, were old and frayed in places, the heavy crucifix something a priest two hundred years ago might have worn. And then there were his eyes. Grieving, ageless eyes. And a heart so calm that it scarcely . . .

"Oh, dear God."

The little priest nodded and smiled approvingly.

"Precisely."

❑❑❑❑❑

Flying wasn't was she expected it to be.

Tracy struggled in the icy grip of the vampire, trying to find a more comfortable position. He had grabbed her by the elbows and simply lifted off, and her arms and shoulders were starting to throb. Her feet dangled who knows how far above the ground, and the chill wind cut through her clothing without mercy. They had been airborne for what her rational mind knew could only be a few minutes, but subjectively it seemed like forever. She hated feeling so passive, so helpless.

Great. Vachon was always telling me I saw vampires under every rock. Now I go looking for a human killer, and what do I find? Vampires who've seen "Pulp Fiction" way too many times. The little bit of bravado she could muster was comforting. They'd managed to talk their way out of being fresh sushi. Now all they had to do was convince this Alia that they were for real.

"Oh!" Suddenly she was dropping, dropping so quickly that for a moment she thought he'd had second thoughts and decided to dump her after all. Then the vampire's fingers were digging deeply into her wrists and a claustrophobic closeness descended around her. After a couple of minutes they seemed to slow and then there was comforting floor beneath her feet. Around her she could hear faint whispers of conversation and the soft murmur of laughter. Soft, cold fingers caressed her chin then flicked away, followed by mocking laughter.

"I didn't know we could get them delivered. Billy, how thoughtful of you."

Other voices getting closer now, with sentences started in one place and finished a second later from across the room. Light, teasing touches on her neck and wrists and the passing flutter of perfume and powder.

"Mmm. Blonde and fruity. I always said you had good taste, William." Powerful hands grasped her by the shoulders while a deep, masculine voice purred insinuatingly in her ear. "You are going to share, I trust?" Laughter erupted around the room. Suddenly they were all around her. Musical, soulless laughter followed by icy breath against her skin again and again, and she knew she was doomed . . .

"Enough!" The voice was soft and feminine, but cut sharply through the rising din. Silence descended immediately, and then the only sounds were the ragged breathing of Natalie and herself. "William, you know better than this. What has possessed you?" Something was wrong. The sweet, motherly voice was coming from too low. Tracy frowned and tried to squint through her blindfold.

"This one's been sipped from, and they both say they're

'just trying to help'." The derision in his voice made his opinion of this statement clear. "We was going to do away with them, like you said, but . . ." Tracy felt small, cool fingers brush against her chin and the heavier brush of something against her mind. A second later the contact was gone.

"You did well, William and Randall. Untie them, if you would, then bring them in to me. Unharmed. Do you understand?" There was a low muttering, but no audible sounds of protest. Suddenly the blindfold was flicked from her eyes, and Tracy blinked in surprise as she saw her strange surroundings.

Natalie was beside her, and the two of them seemed to be the only spots of color or life in the entire room. The room was a large one, and scattered throughout it were elegant, black-clothed strangers in various positions of repose. The first thing that struck her was the aura of stillness and agelessness that the figures gave off. It was as if they had not moved in centuries. Then one of them *would* move, and it was like trying to watch a bullet in flight. An instant later the vampire was in a new position, studiedly casual and aloof. They all watched the two of them with expressions which ranged from mild amusement to mild disdain. No one said a word as Natalie's and her bonds were removed and they were led down a narrow corridor and into a room which looked as ageless and unchanging as the vampires themselves.

The room was very ornate, and done in a style which Tracy thought was probably early French colonial. It was French, that was for certain. No one else would have done those fussy armchairs or the gilded cushions. The only occupant was a small girl who sat in a chair far too large for her. It should have been ludicrous, but somehow the girl pulled it off. She looked to be about six, but Tracy had a bad feeling that the kid was a lot older than that. Their escorts bowed briefly and then left, pulling the door shut behind them.

"Please. Sit down." The voice was the same gently commanding one that they had heard a few minutes before. The little vampire gestured languidly toward the love seat against one wall and waited in patient stillness until they were seated. Then she lifted her delicate face, and Tracy had the same feeling she'd had when she was seven and her governess had caught her with her hand in the cookie jar.

"Now. We have little patience or experience with mortals, so I would advise you to answer quickly and succinctly. What truly brings you here? Please don't attempt to lie. I can assure you I would know, and I would not be pleased. Believe me when I tell you that you wish for me to be pleased with you." Tracy glanced over at Natalie, and the two of them shrugged slightly. When in doubt, give them the truth.

"My name is Detective Tracy Vetter, and this is Doctor Natalie Lambert. We're here from Toronto looking for friends of ours. Vampire friends. It all started when I got a weird message on my answering machine . . ." The little vampire's expression never changed as Tracy spilled out the story. ". . . and then we ended up here. We don't want to cause any trouble. We're just looking for our friends," she repeated. "Look, I'm a cop. Maybe I can help find this killer, this Hunter of yours. It sounds like he may have Nick and Javier. We could help each other."

Alia smiled gently. "And what makes you think we are without a voice among the mortal police? In any case, if the Hunter has indeed found your 'friends', then it is far too late for them." She shook her head dismissively. "Still, I am reluctant to order your deaths. Especially now, we cannot afford the attention it would bring to us."

"Then let us go." Natalie had remained silent while Tracy recounted their tale, but she didn't dare remain so any longer. "We're no threat to you. We have no reason to reveal anything to the authorities, or we would have done it a long time ago. Your people brought us here, remember. We have no interest in the Quebec community. We don't even know where we are. Just have your people return us to where they found us, and we won't bother you again."

Alia considered it for several minutes before replying.

"I do not have the authority to break the Code in that way. By our law, you must die for your knowledge of us. Still, I am reluctant to order your deaths." She clapped her hands together lightly and nodded her head. "It is decided. I will take you before our master, and let him rule on this. If it is his will that you be released, then you shall go free.

"If not, then you will have the honor of nourishing the wisest of us all."

❑❑❑❑❑

"I don't understand." Nick shook his head in confusion. "You're a vampire."

The little priest nodded gravely. "Oh, yes. More than five thousand years ago I doomed myself to eternal damnation. I was afraid to die, you see. Quite rightly so, for I had been a dissolute sinner even as a mortal man, and was no doubt already doomed to burn in Hell for my sins. And so like you, like all of us, I accepted what was offered to me." His face contracted with grief, the little priest turned away. "I became a monster. For century after century I hunted man. Took the farmer in his field, the child in her crib. I *reveled* in it, Nicholas. Can you possibly understand? I declared that there was surely no God, for if there were, surely he would strike down one so evil as myself. I mocked Him. Even the sight of the Redeemer, come to spread the good news, did nothing to deter me from my appointed task." He turned back to face Nick, his face now aglow with an inner joy.

"But then I had an epiphany. God spoke to me, Nicholas. He laid bare my black and twisted soul, and showed me the monster I had made of His good work. The faces of all those I had slain came before my eyes, and I knew I was doomed to eternal damnation. Can you imagine it? Five thousand years. During my lifetime I have slaughtered a hundred times that number. And then there were those that I created . . ." His face darkened for a minute, then he smiled joyously again

"You have had a similar experience, have you not? I could sense it from the moment we met. You abstain from the sacrament of human blood. You feel the need for repentance just as I did. God has spoken to me, Nicholas. He has told me what we must do. No simple act of contrition will absolve us of our sins. We must do more.

"We must destroy them all."

❑❑❑❑❑

"Destroy them? You mean, kill other vampires?" Nick stared at the elder vampire in disbelief. "I don't understand. How can murder absolve murder?" In spite of himself, Nick was intrigued. In all the time he had been searching for his mortality, for his morality, he had never met another vampire who truly understood. Who felt his need for atonement, for forgiveness.

"Is it murder to slay a maddened beast in the field? God has revealed to me our true nature. We are evil, damned creatures, every one of us. At the moment we accepted this un-life, we lost all hope of salvation. God turned His back on us, you see . . .

"Until now. He has seen fit to grace me, Nicholas. I have been blessed with the ability to eliminate our scourge from the earth while redeeming my own terrible sins." The vampire priest smiled contentedly and leaned back on his stool.

Redemption. Nick had sought exactly that for a hundred years. Now this ancient vampire sat before him, telling him all of the things he'd secretly come to believe were true. They were damned, and no mere act of contrition would save them. His own memories of coming across, and of his near-death experience a year ago, told him that much. But to kill the others? Part of him shrunk from the idea. Another, deeper part whispered that perhaps the mad little vampire was right.

In response, memories flooded his mind. Pictures of Janette and him, happily "married" a century before. Janette only a year ago, providing shelter and comfort to the mortal women who needed it. Vachon, laughing as he whipped his bike through a tangle of twisted metal. A dozen others. Aristotle. Merlin. Antoinette, who donated so much of her time and riches to mortal causes, saying with a smile that she was merely preserving the herd. Did they truly deserve to die?

Did he?

More than once Natalie had accused him of wanting just that, saying that his desire for mortality was merely a shallow excuse for a death wish. Each time he had denied it, but the denials grew ever weaker. The possibility of regaining his mortality seemed to grow ever more unlikely as he and Nat faced failure after failure.

And then there was Janette. He was responsible for bringing her back across, dooming her to eternal damnation. His selfishness had doomed her, and condemned countless mortals to die to feed her newly reawakened need. Could the priest possibly be right? His head sagged forward in confusion, and Cain gently patted one shoulder.

"You see?" Nick looked up into the sad brown eyes, unable to speak. The ancient vampire seemed to understand. "It is a hard path He has chosen for us, Nicholas. But it is the true one. I must leave you know. There are certain things I must prepare for the ceremony tonight. My strength must be great, for I strike very soon against the heart of the evil in the city. The last of my children must fall, and with your help, and the unwilling help of the young Spaniard, God's Will will be done."

Nick was scarcely aware of Cain's leaving. Cain's words, and the terrible actions he had taken in God's name, reeled sickly through his mind. Was it possible? Could this ancient vampire actually have received the word of God? His rational, twentieth-century mind rebelled, but the ancient crusader inside him stirred in recognition. Could he actually sit by and let an entire Community be wiped out, will of God or no?

Would he help?

❑❑❑❑❑

The limousine moved slowly through the darkening streets, its tinted windows keeping the enemy sun at bay. Inside, Alia carefully readjusted her veil and sunglasses.

"You understand that you will not speak to him directly. I alone speak to our master, as I have done for the past hundred years. You will remain courteously silent unless he chooses to speak to you. Is this clear?" Both women nodded their agreement. Tracy leaned over and whispered in Natalie's ear.

"I feel like I'm in a Godfather movie." Natalie hid her grin, but apparently Tracy's soft whisper hadn't been soft enough. The small vampire looked up and frowned.

"It is not an inappropriate comparison. My master rules the Community in this city with an iron hand. We exist here only by his sufferance. You would do well to remember that, Detective Vetter. Here we are."

The limo pulled up in front of a tall, overbearing mansion at the north end of the city. High walls kept out the unwashed, and Natalie was willing to bet that guard dogs straight out of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* patrolled the wide green grounds. The mansion looked as of it had been brought across, brick by brick, centuries before. Curtained windows stared blindly out at the drive as they pulled up in front and Alia pulled at her protective veil.

The little vampire looked nervous, Natalie thought, suppressing a shiver. Whatever—or *who*ever—could give this self-possessed vampire the willies was someone she had absolutely zero desire to meet. Alia looked out the window and shook her head. "It is still early. We will wait a few minutes before we disturb him. My master rises late, these past few years."

Wonderful. Natalie bit nervously at a fingernail, then firmly set her hands back in her lap. Not for the first time, she wished that she or Tracy had worn a crucifix, or that Tracy had brought along that ridiculous bag of wooden stakes and crosses. It didn't seem nearly so ridiculous now.

She settled in to wait.

❑❑❑❑❑

Incredibly, Nick had dropped into a fitful sleep. His body, tired from lack of sleep and nourishment, could no longer cope with the pain and uncertainty, and had apparently elected to do something to remedy the situation. Nick's sleep was far from restful, however. Instead, familiar faces, some living, some centuries dead, appeared before him in the echoing darkness. Some of them cheered him, tried to cajole him from his depression. Schanke appeared, telling him to buck up and have a piece of souvlaki. "C'mon, Nick,

just a little piece! Myra made it special." He was followed by a spectral Cohen, who said nothing at all, but looked at him sadly through her veil of blood. Vachon strolled in and draped an arm over her still shoulders. "Come on, Knight! Enough moping around! Wine, women, and song are waiting at the Raven. Well, you can have the wine," he assured Cohen, as they strolled off together.

"Having fun, Nicholas?" LaCroix, of course. He could never escape LaCroix, not even in his dreams. "Isn't this just perfect? At last you've found the guilt and suffering you have been searching for. The Catholic Church has always been good at that sort of thing. Why, the next thing we know, you'll be donning the cassock yourself. And wouldn't that be delicious? A killer, masquerading as a man of peace. Oh, but of course. I forgot. You're no longer a killer, are you? You will never again kill a mortal, I had forgotten. My apologies, Nicholas.

"Of course, there were those traitors during the war, weren't there? And that woman on the Titanic? And, of course, that native woman just a few months ago. My, how reassuring to know that you are no longer a killer.

"Just think of what you would accomplish if you were."

"Nicolas? Nicolas?" LaCroix turned toward the sound of the familiar voice and faded away like smoke. "Nicolas, is that you?"

She was breathtakingly beautiful, just as she had always been. Janette strolled up to him and settled herself gracefully onto the stool which obediently appeared for her.

"What is this, hmm?" A pale, delicate hand reached out and brushed away the tear which trickled down his cheek. "Ah, no more tears, Nick. We have both had more than our share, no?"

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"Forgive you? Nicolas, my darling. You gave me back my life. What is there to forgive?"

"I brought you across. You begged me not to, but I couldn't, couldn't let you go . . ." He faltered, and dropped his eyes. "I doomed you."

Her soft, tinkling laughter brought his eyes back to her exquisite face.

"Oh, no, Nicolas. As much as you like your precious guilt, you cannot have this one. Do you truly think you could do such a thing against my will? Even mon cher Lucien could accomplish no such thing. I chose, Nicolas. I chose to return to what I am. You merely offered me the choice. Is that such a terrible thing?"

"But we are damned. God has turned His face away from us, Janette. You know it's true."

"I know no such thing. Do the damned love, Nicolas? Do they feel compassion, hope? Guilt? I would not presume to say what God intends for us, but I cannot believe he means for us all to die at the hands of a madman. If he truly wanted us destroyed, do you honestly think he would choose such a poorly made weapon? That mortal disease could have killed us much more efficiently, and did not.

"Will you become our disease?" She rose from the stool in one graceful motion and turned away from him, a sad, gentle smile on her face.

"Don't go!"

"I must. You have much to do, Nicolas. As do I. One can only wallow in grief or guilt so long. Life goes on, Nicolas.

"Will you?"

❑❑❑❑❑

". . . you join me, Nick?" Nick opened his eyes. Janette was gone, of course. Instead, the small, slender form of the vampire priest sat on her stool, looking down at him kindly. "My road is a hard one, but one that your company would make less onerous. Say that you will."

Nick stared at the young/old face which hovered above him. The brown eyes which implored him from below shaggy black hair were indeed compassionate. But his brief rest, or perhaps some small remnant of Janette's presence in his mind, showed him more.

The eyes which looked down on him glittered with more than compassion. A mad, zealous gleam filled them, while lines of madness etched themselves deeply into the fine skin around those eyes. His smile was strained, and revealed teeth stained with fresh blood. The elder vampire noticed his gaze, and covered his mouth with one embarrassed hand.

"Yes, well, I'm afraid I haven't yet found a way around *that*. Still, even here God is merciful. He has shown me how I may survive and grow stronger without the taint of further human blood on my soul." He shifted, and Nick caught a glimpse of a still form on the floor behind him. "I take from the guilty, you see. It's ironic, isn't it? The blood of murderers aids the cause of God's holy work."

"You drink vampire blood?" Nick's voice was a stunned whisper. Oh, it was one thing to exchange blood between lovers. But *this*. To drain another vampire to the point of death was forbidden. They could kill each other, of course. But to drain the life from another, to gain that one's power, was forbidden above nearly all else. Only exposing the Community to the mortal world held penalties more severe. The priest nodded contentedly.

"It lends me strength. I may be some five thousand years old, but I'm not invincible."

"What have you done?" Understanding flowed through Nick. How could he have been so blind?

"I've brought your companion up to you. He will be of no further use to me after tonight, and the sun will destroy the remains with the coming of the dawn. Not to worry," he added as Nick's face flushed with anger. "Those that aid me so in my work—even unwilling—gain absolution in death. I'm quite sure of it." Behind him there was the clank of metal and a low moan, and Cain turned his head and smiled in that direction.

"Good evening, young Javier. So good of you to rejoin us."

"Yeah, well—" *cough* "—the pleasure's all yours. Can't say I much like the accommodations." Vachon's voice was weak, but clear.

"I didn't expect you would. Still, it has been far better than you deserve. Oh, don't try to deny it. The smell of the humans you take clings to you like a stain."

"We don't need to kill." Vachon's voice came to Nick from behind Cain, growing steadily stronger. "Don't you get

it? Nobody—" He broke off as a loud bell chimed from somewhere down below. Cain cocked his head to one side, listening.

"You will both remain silent. No one can hear us up here, in any case." Without another word, the vampire wheeled and swept down the stairs. The bell sounded once again.

"Vachon?"

"Hello. So, how's your day been?"

"I've seen better."

"Yeah. Me, too. Don't suppose you've got a plan?"

"I'm working on it."

"Oh. That's good." Vachon winced, and pulled himself carefully up into a sitting position. He was ghastly pale, with blood trickling down from a deep gash in his forearm. Experimentally, he pulled at the manacle on his wrist, and nodded slightly. Patiently he began to twist it back and forth, working the blood which still flowed slowly down his arm under the metal bracelet. From down below, the faintest sounds of voices reached them.

❑❑❑❑❑

Alia pressed the door chime a third time. It wasn't like her master to keep her waiting. Normally, he sensed her presence before she had even moved through the gates. Still, lately he had seemed more distracted than usual. He had passed it off as a lingering melancholy, but she wasn't so sure. All of them were subject to that after they passed their first millennium. This was something more. She flicked a glance back at the waiting mortals. Apparently she had succeeded in cowing them sufficiently. They stood together a few paces behind her, all but holding hands. As she reached for the chime one last time, the door opened.

"Alia. Child, what brings you here so early?" Cain stood there, one arm casually blocking her entrance.

"My apologies for disturbing you, master. But I bring you news which should not wait. May I come in?"

"It will keep. You need no help in dealing with mortals, surely."

He began to close the door when Natalie spoke.

"Wait! Please, we need to speak to you." As his frozen gaze turned to her, Natalie's words stuck in her throat. "We're here looking for two of your kind. They may have been attacked by your Hunter. Please!" she cried out, as the door slowly closed.

❑❑❑❑❑

"Please!" Natalie's cry stabbed painfully at Nick's heart. Across the room he could see Vachon momentarily close his eyes in despair. Maybe she would be smart, leave now while she could. Dear, sweet Natalie. Determined to save him, if only from himself. Nick looked over as Vachon pulled one bloody hand free, wincing as the manacle bit deeply over his skin. Vachon must be weaker than he looked if the metal could cause that much pain and damage. Nick tugged sharply at his own bonds. Stronger now, he could feel them give slightly. Would it be enough?

❑❑❑❑❑

Cain started back up the long circular staircase. Dear Alia, holding too fiercely to the old traditions. He would miss her deeply, but he consoled himself with the thought that she would at last see the face of God. Wearily, he stopped and donned the cassock that he wore while performing God's work. God had ordained him, would understand that the terrible things he did were only for the greater good. He had lived five thousand years, after all. Killed countless hundreds of thousands of mortals. There had to be a greater purpose to it all. There must be.

The top floor was as he had left it. His two guests were still chained in place, although they had both risen to meet him as he approached. Good. It was always better to face death on one's feet, and at least one of these tormented souls would face it tonight.

"Avon lady?" the younger one inquired.

Cain shook his head. The question was meaningless.

"No. I know. Amway. Can't get rid of those guys if you try. At least it wasn't the Jehovah's Witnesses. Wouldn't they have gotten a surprise," the Spaniard added in an aside to his companion, smiling mockingly at Cain. Had the last few hours driven him insane?

"Your babbling will avail you naught. You will die tonight, boy. Better that you should spend your last hours in holy contemplation."

The boy met his eyes unflinchingly. "Guess I'm not much of a contemplative sort of guy. Why don't you—"

Cain tuned him out as something stirred inside him. Something was wrong. What had changed in the room? Both of them were still manacled. The table with its Bible and holy water still sat against the far wall. The stool—

The stool. Eyes wide in disbelief, he turned to face Nicholas.

"What have you done?"

"Distracted you." Cain spun back to face the young Spaniard as he spoke. There was a flash of movement, and suddenly bright, agonizing pain flooded through him.

PAIN. It had been centuries since he'd felt the bite of wood, known the fear of a mortal blow. Reflexively he struck out at the source of the pain, backhanding the filthy vampire and sending him smashing into the wall. Behind him he could hear the creak of metal beginning to give way. Half maddened with pain, he snatched at the thin leg of the stool which protruded from his chest. Grasping at the end of it, he began to slowly pull it from his chest.

❑❑❑❑❑

"Did you hear that?" Tracy stopped in her tracks, and Natalie had to pull herself up quickly to avoid walking into her.

"Hear what?" Nat strained, but all she could hear was the sound of the evening breeze as it blew around the corners of the old mansion. Beside then, Alia stiffened.

"It sounded like a cry." Tracy's hand went automatically

to her holster and came up empty. The captain was going to be so mad. How could she explain that it was taken away by an undead lunatic? There wasn't anyplace on the forms for something like that.

"Wait here." Alia spun on her heel and headed back to the house. Above them, the cry was repeated.

❑❑❑❑❑

"You! Miserable little child, do you have any idea of what you could have done?" Cain snarled at the dark-haired monster in front of him. He could see now that what he had at first taken for the second manacle was merely a coating of blood on that wrist, and that the broken pieces of the wooden stool had been shoved carelessly under the table. He had become careless.

"No more. I have prayed over your miserable soul, but I will pray no longer."

Nicholas was shouting something behind him, but it wasn't important now. With a low, inhuman growl Cain lashed out, feeling with satisfaction the leg shatter as he impaled it in the younger vampire's chest. The sight of the blood excited and infuriated him further, and he lifted the boy with ease.

Nick watched in horror as Cain lifted Vachon as if he were a toy. Vachon's face contorted in pain. Suddenly he looked up and met Nick's eyes clearly over the mad vampire's shoulder. A thin trickle of blood flowed from the corner of his mouth, and then something small and shiny flew across the room at Nick. Reflexively he caught it out of the air as Cain snarled again.

"You wish your freedom? Then have it!" Holding the vampire aloft, Cain turned and threw him at the shuttered window. The shutters gave way with a shriek of splintered wood and then the creature was gone, falling down five stories to the hard ground below.

❑❑❑❑❑

"Cain!" Alia pounded loudly on the door while behind her Tracy and Natalie exchanged worried looks. Something was clearly up. They hadn't gotten anything like the reception they'd been expecting. The youthful, slender figure who had answered their knock had been a far cry from the elderly patrician of *The Godfather*, and he had dismissed the three of them with scarcely a glance. Alia clearly felt it, too.

"Cain!" The thick wood began to splinter under her small fists. At first, Natalie thought that was the sound she heard. No. The shriek of splintering wood was far too loud to be coming from the front door. Too loud, and too distant. It was followed almost instantly by a maddened roar that froze Alia in place. Finally, there was the unmistakable sound of something heavy impacting with the solid, unforgiving ground. Filled with dread, Natalie ran toward the sound, Tracy close behind her.

It was bad. Vachon—and for a small, unworthy moment Nat was intensely grateful that it wasn't Nick—was sprawled over the remains of a stone bench, his spine clearly snapped by the terrible impact. Blood had spattered outward as it usually did in cases of high velocity impact, coating the surrounding area with bright red color. The remains of a shattered wooden stick in his chest told her why he hadn't made any attempt to slow his fall.

"Nat, what—" Quickly, Natalie interposed herself between the scene and the young detective.

"It's over, Tracy. Look at me! It's over. There's nothing we can do." Nat felt tears well up in grief and sympathy. She hadn't known the man very well, but he'd seemed kind. And Tracy had clearly cared for him. "C'mon, Trace. Let's walk away." Please God, don't let her last memories of him be like this.

"Natalie! Would you *please* stop trying to protect me? I can take care of—" She broke off as she pushed past Natalie. For a moment Tracy just stared uncomprehendingly, her face dead white. Then she took a ragged breath.

"NO!" The agonized scream tore at her throat, but Tracy didn't appear to feel a thing. Then she was staggering across the grass toward the small outdoor patio and Vachon. Natalie took a half step toward her, only to feel a soft, cool hand on her arm.

"Leave her. Leave this place, Doctor Lambert." Alia was looking up at her, her own small face a mask of grief. "There is nothing you can do, save protect your own life. Go, now." A moment later Natalie found herself walking unsteadily back toward the car, Tracy and Vachon forgotten.

❑❑❑❑❑

"Javier!" Tracy cried out hopelessly. Somehow she made it through the rubble to his side, her tears blinding her to the nightmare in front of her. He was already cold, so cold, his skin a thin, waxy parchment. Dark shadows had appeared beneath his eyes and cheekbones, and his thrown-back head revealed sharp canines, even more prominent now in his . . . death.

"No. You're not going to die. Not now!" She reached out and brushed thick brown hair out of his unseeing eyes. "You're not leaving me this way. Do you hear me?" She ran her fingers lightly across his still lips. No breath, so sign of recognition. She grabbed one limp hand and held it tightly. "Natalie! Oh, God, Natalie!" Desperately she brushed away her tears and looked wildly behind her.

Natalie was nowhere in sight.

"He means that much to you?" Startled, Tracy spun her head around. Alia was now standing in front of her, looking soberly down at Javier's ruined body.

"Yes. Please, there must be something we can do." Tracy's voice broke on the last word, and she looked down in despair. It was over. Through her returning tears she saw the small vampire kneel down and examine Vachon closely. Two long gashes on one arm, which might have been puncture marks, absorbed Alia's attention. After what seemed an eternity she looked up. Her face was set and grim.

"It may yet be possible to save him. You will need to remove the wood—all of it!—from his chest. Before he can begin to heal, if he heals at all, this must be done. Do you understand?"

Tracy nodded numbly. It seemed impossible. Vachon's

body was shattered, his blood splattered everywhere. Still, if there was even the slightest chance . . . Gingerly at first, then with more strength, she tugged at the largest piece of wood. The sound it made as it finally slid against bone and free of his body was bad, as was the slow welling up of blood from the open wound. Tracy put her squeamishness aside and went back to work.

❑❑❑❑❑

Natalie blinked, and suddenly she was standing in front on the black limousine, her insulated first-aid kit still clutched tightly in one hand. Where had she been going? A part of her whispered insistently that she was to leave. That's it. She was leaving. Natalie put her hand on the door, then pulled it away as if it were hot. Leave? Tracy was still here, weeping over Vachon's still body. And Nick. Nick was here somewhere, she knew it. Nick was in trouble.

Tracy would have to fend for herself. The thought appalled Natalie with its ruthlessness, but she knew it to be the simple truth. Vachon was almost certainly dead. Her duty was to the living. To Nick. Concentrating on that, Natalie turned and walked calmly back toward the house.

The heavy wooden door looked like a battering ram had attacked it, and Natalie slipped through with little effort. As soon as she stepped into the foyer she could hear voices raised in argument. One, blessedly, was Nick's. *Nick was still alive.* The other voice, which by turns raged loudly and implored softly, had an edge of madness to it which sent a shiver down her spine. The voices were coming from somewhere up above. Setting her first aid kit down by the door, Natalie looked around the room in amazement.

The elegant foyer opened up into a paneled study. Inside, a fire burned briskly in the stone fireplace, casting a glow over the rows and rows of ancient books. The motif of the room was clearly warfare. A full set of armor stood guard near the door, and various pieces of weaponry from a dozen different centuries lined the walls. Nat looked closely at one of them.

It was a pointed stick. Rather, it was a long, narrow wooden pole, fitted on one end with an ornate silver hilt. The other end came to a sharp point, and it was only here that the fine oak was discolored. Discolored to a deep, rusty brown. Natalie scraped lightly at the stain, and it came away easily. Just as she thought, it was blood.

It wasn't old, however. The blood didn't flake away into dust as she'd expected. Instead, it clung weakly to her fingertips until she wiped them on her pants with a grimace. Someone had been attacked with this, and recently. And someone in Quebec was hunting vampires. Using a vampire's own weapons? Natalie shook her head. It didn't matter now. Pulling the stick from the wall, she tested its weight in her hands.

Someone in this house was hunting vampires. He had attacked Vachon, and held Nick prisoner here somehow. Maybe some vampires deserved to die. From what she'd seen, maybe most of them did. But that wasn't up to her, nor to the killer upstairs, that much she was sure of. Let God sort that one out.

And if that bastard upstairs had hurt Nick, he'd be talking to God about it real soon. Natalie set the stick comfortably in her hands, then went out into the foyer. The wooden stairs spiraled up before her into the darkness. One hand reaching for the railing, Natalie put her foot on the first step and began her ascent into Hell.

❑❑❑❑❑

Nick slipped the small silver key Vachon had tossed him between his fingers as Cain turned toward him. The ancient vampire's face was congested with rage, a striking contrast to the gentle, avowed man of peace Nick had met mere hours ago.

"YOU DARE!" Cain's voice echoed around the large, empty chamber. Emptier by far than it had been just a few seconds before. "You spoke as if you understood my mission! You abstain from the sacrilege of taking human blood. You seek redemption! And then!" He snatched up a piece of the broken shutter and threw in across the room. "Then you attempt to betray me to that animal!" Nick ducked, and the wood sailed harmlessly overhead.

"He was no animal." Nick's voice dropped to a low, threatening whisper. Rage at Vachon's senseless death and at the madman who had killed him flooded Nick. It was a welcome sensation. Ruthlessly, he pushed Cain further. "You're the animal. You butcher innocent people to feed your fantasies of redemption. And they are fantasies, Cain." Setting his hands in front of him with a calm he didn't feel, Nick slipped the precious key into the lock of one of his manacles. It would be a poor joke if Vachon's last act were to prove meaningless. He continued to bait the insane vampire in front of him while he jiggled the key in the stiff lock. "All you've done is add to your sins. How many, Cain? How many of us have you slaughtered? Dozens?"

Cain's fury seemed to drain out of him.

"Hundreds. It has been hard, Nicholas. But I have seen what lies within us all. I *know* what must be done. Believe me, I take no pleasure in what I must do." The humble priest was back again, all compassion and mercy. "It's not too late for you, Nicholas. Put away your anger over the boy, and let me anoint you into His service. All your questions will be answered, all of your pain taken from you."

click

Cain walked toward the small wooden table, the small sound apparently unnoticed. Whispering a brief prayer, he dipped one finger into the bowl of water. His back to Nick, Cain didn't see Nick quickly shift the key to his other hand and unlatch the second manacle. With a small smile he turned around and gestured with one smoking hand.

"It is time." Ignoring the pain and smoke, he smiled blissfully as he made the sign of the cross in front of Nick then bent to brush his smoking fingers against Nick's forehead. "*In padre nomine . . .*"

For a last few seconds, Nick wavered. Cain was almost certainly mad, but what of it? Many of the greatest saints had the touch of madness upon them. And any cure for his pain and guilt was a tremendous temptation . . .

Do the damned love, Nicolas? For a moment, it was as if Janette was there, smiling gently down at him. Yes, he loved. He had loved Janette. He loved Natalie. He loved *life*. The last of his rage left him, and for one blissful moment Nick knew peace. This sad little man was wrong. Natalie had been right. *Who are we to think we know His plan?*

"No." Gently, he reached out and took Cain's arm. "No more. No more deaths, Cain." The elder stopped in mid-sentence to stare uncomprehendingly at him.

"I don't understand." One last time Cain was the gentle, penitent man, humbly seeking to do God's work, and it nearly broke Nick's heart. "How can you turn your back on Him, Nicholas?"

"I don't. But this isn't the way, Cain. This is wrong." For a few seconds Nick thought it was over. Cain sagged and shook his head wearily.

"It has been so long. So many deaths. How could I have been wrong?" Nick watched in horror and amazement as darkness crept up Cain's face, flowing into his eyes like poison. "But, of course, I'm not wrong. How could I be? God has spoken. You thought you could deceive me with your kind words, but I have seen through you, Nicholas DeBrabant. You do Satan's work!" With a snarl, he launched himself at Nick's throat. "Deceiver!"

Nick dodged the hands easily, darting quickly around the enraged elder. Instincts which had nothing to do with being a vampire kicked in, and he grabbed the raving man from behind, locking his flailing arms to his sides. Cain growled in response and hurtled them both skyward. The ceiling came up with alarming speed, and Nick grunted in surprise as his back slammed into cold stone.

Two could play at that game. Concentrating, Nick altered their direction, taking both of them spinning toward the far wall. Too late, Cain saw what he was doing. They slammed into the wall at top speed with a meaty crunch and blood dribbled briefly from Cain's forehead. Nick looked wildly around the room. There had to be something he could use, some weapon . . . the stool. Struggling with his maddened burden, Nick sent them both toward the floor. On impact he rolled free, snatching up the stool and snapping off one of its remaining legs. Leaping to his feet, Nick began to turn to face his attacker when something landed with a snarl on his back.

❑❑❑❑❑

Tracy's hands were slick with blood as she pulled the last splinter from Vachon's chest. It was tough to tell through the blood, but she was fairly sure she'd gotten them all. Vachon hadn't responded to any of it. He just lay there, blood slowly dripping onto the cement bench and then down to the bricks below. Even that flow had slowed, and that more than anything else worried her. Alia had said that there was still hope. But how much damage could a vampire take? Brushing a strand of damp hair away from her face, she looked up for Alia.

Alia was looking toward the mansion, her arms wrapped tightly around herself.

"Alia!" Tracy had to repeat the girl's name three times before the vampire looked back in her direction. "I've gotten them all, I think. What do I do now?" The vampire blinked, then walked back over to kneel beside them. Delicately, she extended one finger and traced it along the edges of Vachon's gaping chest wound. Bringing the finger to her nose, she sniffed, then licked lightly at the blood there.

"No." Alia shook her head, and made as if to rise.

"What do you mean, 'no'? You said that he could still be saved!"

"I said that it *might* be possible. But he is young, and the damage is very great. It simply isn't worth—" Alia stopped in surprise. "What do you intend to do with that, child?" Her voice was carefully casual, but Tracy noticed that she didn't move, either.

"Whatever I have to." Tracy tightened her grip on the gore-streaked wood, its sharp end pressed firmly against the underside of Alia's chin. "You said it wasn't too late. Help him!" Pleading with someone you were threatening to stake probably wasn't the best idea, but she couldn't quite keep the fear and desperation out of her voice. Alia looked inscrutably into her eyes, and then she saw the vampire's eyes drop to her neck. Alia smiled knowingly.

"You think he cares for you, don't you?" The pity on her face was nearly unbearable, but Tracy forced herself to meet those cold green eyes. "Does he whisper sweet nothings in your ear as he takes what he needs from you? You really should know better, Detective Vetter. A vampire's heart is as cold as his hands, and as ruthless. You deceive yourself badly if you think any different."

"Shut up! I don't care what you think. It doesn't even matter if it's true," she added softly. "*I* care. Now, you do whatever you can to help him, or so help me God I'll drive this stake through your neck."

"Which would not kill me."

Tracy shrugged. "Maybe not. But I'm betting it would keep you busy long enough for me to get some gasoline and a match from the car. Try coming back from that, you bitch." She stared fearlessly into the vampire's icy gaze. *Come on, come on* . . . They locked eyes for several seconds, then Alia dropped her gaze back to Vachon.

"Very well. I will *try*. But it will not matter in the end. Cain will come for us all." She looked up at Tracy, and now her icy green eyes melted with grief. Then she blinked once, and the moment was gone. "I will need your help." Calmly, the child-like vampire placed one hand over Tracy's on the stake. "We don't have much time. Shall we begin?"

❑❑❑❑❑

Natalie watched in horror as the two men struggled in mid-air. Brutally, they slammed each other into the walls and ceiling, the only sounds Cain's lows growls and their grunts of effort. Suddenly they crashed to the ground, and Nick rolled away. Nat saw immediately what he was reaching for.

So did Cain. With a snarl, Cain leapt. He landed squarely on Nick's back, and from across the room Nat could clearly see the claws which swept down towards Nick's neck. They were too close to each other for her to risk stabbing at Cain. Taking a deep breath, Natalie charged, swinging the long stake

like a club.

❑❑❑❑❑

Nick felt Cain's claws brush against the vulnerable skin of his neck. The little vampire was incredibly fast! He reached with both hands, grasping at the other man's wrists and pulling them from his neck. Cain was strong—unimaginable strong!—and Nick was only able to move them a few precious inches. Suddenly a loud *crack* rent the air, and Cain's fierce grip slipped. He had one chance. Tightening his grip on Cain's arms, Nick wheeled and threw the vampire toward the stairs. Too late, he saw Natalie standing behind him, holding aloft a bloody staff like a warrior priestess. Cain slammed into her, and they went down in a tumble of arms and legs.

❑❑❑❑❑

"It's not working." Tracy knelt over Vachon's still form, staring anxiously at his face. Alia knelt on the other side of him, one small wrist pressed firmly against his mouth. He lay unresponsive on the grass where they had laid him out. *Oh, please. Please, let it work.*

Vachon suddenly shuddered.

"Wake up, child." Alia's voice brooked no disobedience. Another shudder, and Tracy saw Vachon swallow convulsively. Alia made a small sound in her throat, but held her arm still. Tracy was forcibly reminded of the last time she'd seen this, when Javier had tried desperately to keep Screed alive. This time he was on the receiving end, and she watched with relief as color flowed back into his face. A short time later Alia wrenched her arm away with a small cry to collapse bonelessly on the grass.

"Vachon? Can you hear me?"

He opened his eyes, and Tracy could have cried with relief when his brown eyes met hers in recognition. Then his eyes closed again, and he began to cough. It was a wet, terrible sound. Gently, she lifted his shoulders and rolled him onto his side, where he weakly coughed out thick, congealed blood. Not knowing what else to do, she held him, letting him work through whatever he needed to do. It couldn't possibly be good for him, losing more blood like this. When at last the coughing subsided he lay limply in her arms, his eyes closed.

"Vachon?" Gently, she brushed his long dark hair away from his face. Beside them, she could see Alia struggling to stand. "Please, wake up."

❑❑❑❑❑

"Not another step, Nicholas," Cain warned. One black-clad arm held Natalie tightly against him, while the other lightly caressed her cheek. His face was bloody from their fight, and Nick could see blood slowly flowing down his neck from Natalie's blow. Nick stood up slowly, holding his hands out before him.

"Cain, she has nothing to do with us. Release her." As he had done with LaCroix, Nick stood calmly, pretending that his world wasn't threatening to end. Natalie stared mutely at him, her hands scrabbling frantically at Cain's arms. Cain paid no attention to her efforts.

"Nothing to do with us? Oh, I think not. How many have you corrupted, Nicholas? How many good mortal souls like this one have you led to serve Satan?"

"None. Natalie is . . . a friend. Nothing more. Release her, Cain."

"No. Better that she have a quick, clean death before you soil her further." His hand went to her neck. "Don't struggle, my dear. One quick snap, and I promise you'll feel no pain." His grip tightened, and Natalie was unable to keep back a small cry of fear and pain.

"Cain. Cain, please. Don't do this." Nick took a small step forward. "Let her go. I'll do whatever you ask." When the other vampire didn't reply, Nick continued hopelessly, "You can have me instead. The woman is nothing to you, Cain. She has committed no sin. I'm the one you want. The killer. The monster. Let her go, Cain, and you can have me." Nick held both hands face up in supplication.

"Nick, no. Don't do this." Natalie's voice was barely a whisper, but her eyes spoke volumes. "Nick, get out of here. Don't let him—" Cain's hand came down hard over her mouth.

"How touching." The words were meant to sound mocking, Nick knew. "Both so willing to sacrifice themselves for the other. Would you truly do that, my dear? For this vampire before you?" He removed his hand from her mouth, and returned it to her throat.

"Yes," Natalie said instantly. "Please, Cain, let him go. He's a good man." Before she could add any more, his hand cut her off again. This time he could not meet Nick's gaze.

"And you, Nicholas. Do you give me your word you will surrender yourself to me if I free this woman?"

"Yes," he said simply.

"Why?" Cain looked at him uncomprehendingly. "Why would you do such a thing?"

"Because I love her." The words hung in the air between them like a living thing. Tears fell swiftly down Natalie's face as Cain shook his head from side to side.

"This cannot be. How—?" He looked from Nick to Natalie and back again. "I—I—take her then!" Releasing her from his iron grip, Cain shoved Natalie toward Nick, blood tears welling up in his own eyes. "You have me at a disadvantage, sir. I assure you, we will meet again!"

As Nick caught Natalie in his arms, Cain spun toward the stairwell. His feet had just touched the first step when he stopped and looked down at his chest in confusion. Staggering back into the room, he grasped weakly at Natalie's staff, now penetrating completely through his chest.

"Nick?" Natalie looked at him in confusion. She'd dropped the staff when Cain had slammed into her, and had heard it go tumbling down the stairs. So who . . . ?

"Let's try this again, shall we?"

Nick almost laughed with relief. Leaning against the railing, as pale as death, was Vachon. He looked over at Nick and Nat and grinned sardonically.

"Aren't you through here yet?"

With a snarl of rage Cain launched himself at Vachon. He was slower now, and Nick reached him before he had crossed

half the room. Grabbing the blood-slicked staff, he swung with all of his strength. Cain flew across the room and slammed with a satisfying thud into the far wall. Stunned, he slid silently to the floor.

"Nat, get out of here."

Natalie nodded, and began to sidle around the insane vampire. He looked unconscious, though you never knew with these guys. If she had any doubts about that, all she had to do was look at Vachon, standing there as bold as day. Bad choice of words, Nat. One more step, and . . .

With a blur of movement, Cain grabbed for her ankle. Natalie looked down and into the face of madness. He was grinning through a mouthful of blood, dragging the staff along with him as he began to crawl up her leg. She flinched away from him in revulsion. One flailing hand brushed against a table, and she risked a quick glance in that direction. On it was a Bible: probably not much good right now, unless striking him with it hurt him. Another thing to ask Nick, some time. Next to the Bible was a golden chalice. Hazy memories of her grandmother's flirtation with Catholicism came to the surface. Could it be . . . ?

Cain's hands were digging painfully into her legs. Nick seemed frozen in place, afraid to move lest the vampire strike. She'd have to chance it. Natalie grabbed the golden goblet and splashed the contents directly into Cain's face.

"Yeeeaaarg!" Cain let go of Natalie's leg and grabbed for his face. The holy water hissed and sizzled where it had struck him, burning deeply into his skin and eyes. Natalie took a stunned step backward, and that was all Nick needed. He crossed the room and snatched Natalie up into his arms. Then they were across the room and Natalie was safe.

"Watch her."

Vachon nodded. The young vampire was leaning heavily on Tracy, who had appeared from nowhere.

"No problem, Nick. Go take care of business, would you?"

❑❑❑❑❑

It was done.

Nick swayed with exhaustion as he stood over Cain's still body. Wood from the stool and chair had done the job, but had left his own hands cut and bleeding from a dozen splinter cuts. It wasn't really over, of course. Left this way, Cain might eventually be able to heal himself, or call to one who could.

"One of us will have to stay behind. The sunlight will kill him, but I'm not willing to leave him alone until then."

"I will." The child vampire from last night—was it only last night?—was standing at the stairwell. Calmly, she walked between them to Cain's body, where she knelt by the head. One small hand brushed at his hair, stroked his bloody cheek.

"Oh, Cain. Why couldn't you confide in my, my father, my love?" Her voice broke on the last word, and tears began to run down her face. "Why could you not share your pain?" Slowly, she lowered her head and kissed him gently on the lips. "Oh, how I will miss you." She raised her head and looked at each of them, mortal and vampire, in turn.

"Leave now. You've done what needed to be done, God curse you. Just go."

"You know what has to be done?" Nick had to be sure. She nodded impatiently through her tears.

"Far better than you, I suspect. Now go."

"I don't think so."

Nick turned slowly toward the voice. He was simply too tired to react anymore. It was an Enforcer, of course. The pronounced facial features and the supreme arrogance stamped on them proclaimed his position far better than any words.

"Nicholas DeBrabant, Javier Vachon, you have been found guilty of crimes against the Code. Eliminate these mortals now, and perhaps you shall be allowed to live."

Nick put his arm protectively around Nat, and was pleased to see Vachon step unsteadily forward to stand in front of Tracy.

"Not a chance, batboy," the Spaniard said flatly. "Believe me. After what we've been through tonight, you're just not that impressive."

"The fact that you stopped Cain, completing my original task for me, will not save you." The Enforcer's voice was flat and unemotional. "Even if you succeed in escaping me here, your fates are sealed. I have the proof I need. Once I report it to the Conclave, every hand will turn against you. Your lives are forfeit if you do not act now."

"We're no threat to you."

The Enforcer turned toward Natalie as she spoke. In that split second, Tracy stepped calmly from behind Vachon. In her hands was a lethal crossbow, courtesy of Cain's collection down below. Nick watched in stunned surprise as she lifted the ancient weapon, aimed, and released the wooden bolt.

"Well, maybe just a little threat." Tracy's voice was dead calm, and Nick's eyes couldn't leave her face as the bolt shot home. The Enforcer gasped in surprise and staggered backward, apparently forgetting the window behind him. Tracy didn't even blink as he tumbled through the window, his eyes wide with surprise and dismay. It was only when they all heard the meaty thud down below that her calm cracked. Tossing the spent crossbow to one side, she turned and buried her face in Vachon's shoulder.

"You know," Natalie said calmly, "I'm really ready to go home now."

"Me, too." Nick squeezed her shoulder gently.

"I will see to our 'guest'. One last victim of Cain's madness, I fear." Alia stood up slowly and brushed at the stains on her dress. "You will be safe in our city for the day, but we have long memories here. Do not return to Quebec, and you are free to do as you will." She nodded at them remotely, then walked like a sleepwalker down the stairs.

"Let's go," Nick said quietly. Natalie nodded, her head resting tiredly against his shoulder. "Let's go home."

Epilogue

It was over. Shaking with delayed reaction, Tracy turned on the faucet and splashed her face with cold water. Behind her she could hear the low murmur of voices as the others calmly discussed the aftermath of the night's activities. Natalie, the only one who still looked remotely presentable after their terrible night, had found them two adjoining rooms on the outskirts of Quebec just as the sun began to edge over the horizon. Room service had been ordered, but at the thought of food the room swam alarmingly around her and she hastily splashed another handful of cold water on her face. Too much blood, too much horror. It would be hours before she would be able to even think about food or sleep. Her blouse stuck uncomfortably to her skin where blood—Vachon's blood—had dried, and she grimaced as she looked down at herself.

"Tracy?"

She jumped and looked up into the mirror. Vachon was standing in the doorway, his thin, pale frame leaning wearily against the wooden frame. For a moment their eyes met in the mirror and then she hastily lowered hers. Two days ago she had been certain of where she stood with him. Now she had been forcibly reminded that he was entirely different from her. He was a vampire, an immortal—well, almost—being nearly five hundred years old. What had she imagined that he could feel for her, a twenty-five year old mortal detective from Toronto? She splashed more water on her face, then began to studiously pat herself dry.

"Want to use the sink?" *Good, Tracy. Keep it light. Don't embarrass yourself.* In the mirror, she caught a glimpse of him shaking his head.

"Nah. We need to talk, Trace." He hadn't moved, but suddenly she was acutely aware of his presence behind her. "I mean, we haven't exactly had much chance to do that lately. Look, about Sunday night . . ." He trailed off uncertainly, and her heart contracted painfully. When she didn't respond, he continued gamely, "Look, I'm not very good at stuff like this. Too many years on the run, too many . . . Well, it doesn't matter now. I kind of ran out on you, kiddo." He stood a few steps toward her, and she could feel his cool breath on the back of her neck. She studiously cleaned underneath her fingernails, removing the last traces of dried blood there.

This is it. He's going to tell you it's over. She bit her lip painfully as the thought welled up inside her. Still not looking at him, she nodded. "It's okay. I understand. You were worried about your friend. And, anyway, it's not like, well . . ." Steeling herself, she looked up into his eyes in the mirror, and her cool, brave words died in her throat. He was standing just behind her, his brown eyes looking uncertainly into hers. *This isn't easy for him, either.* The thought was comforting, somehow. Lightly, his hands came to rest on her shoulders and he leaned forward so that their cheeks were nearly touching.

"I shouldn't have. Yeah, I was worried about Louis, and I owed Nick a pretty big favor. But . . ." Now it was his eyes that dropped, unable to meet her gaze. "But the truth is, you scare the hell out of me, Trace."

"What?" It came out as a stunned whisper. *Me? I scare him?* Wide-eyed, she stared at his reflection in the mirror. He nodded ruefully.

"Oh, yeah. I guess that's really why I left the way I did. Things get too strange, and I just move on." He took a deep breath and raised his eyes to meet hers. "Guess it's time to take a chance. I'm not leaving this time. I don't want to lose you, Tracy." He'd dropped his guard completely, and the mixture of affection and nervousness that she saw in his handsome face took her breath away. After a long moment his gaze dropped again, and he kissed her cheek gently, a wry grin spreading across his face. "If you'll have me, that is. What do you say?"

It was a serious question, and she gave it a full three seconds of thought before replying. It wouldn't be easy. They were so different in so many ways. And Dad would have an absolute fit. Not to mention Mom . . . *Oh, stop it. You already know the answer.*

You love him.

He was still waiting. She smiled at him, and leaned her body back to rest lightly against his. "I say 'you bet'."

His own smile broadened, and he slipped his arms gently around her waist. They stood that way for a long while, relishing the new understanding between them. Finally Tracy broke the moment with a small chuckle.

"Well, now that we've got that straightened out," She twisted in his arms until she was facing him, their eyes nearly level. Arms still around her, he raised his eyebrows quizzically.

"There's something else?"

She opened her mouth to reply, and he covered it lightly with his own. The kiss was gentle and tender, with just the first hints of desire. The last of the day's horror slipped painlessly from her as they stood, locked in that quiet embrace. At last, with effort, she broke the kiss and grinned at him playfully.

"As I was saying." She tweaked lightly at the ruined surface of his shirt. "There is one other thing. I don't want to be rude, but, well, this shirt, it's—" She ducked her head as he tried to kiss her again "—it's really gross. I can pick you up another when the stores open, but in the meantime . . ."

"Are you telling me I need to take a shower?" His voice was light and teasing, and his fingers moved to tickle her ribs. "After all I've been through, that's all you can say? That I smell bad?"

"Well, you do. " She squirmed in his grasp, struggling to keep from laughing aloud in happiness and relief. "Oh! Stop that! Nick and Natalie—"

"Have apparently found something better to do. Maybe Natalie's making Nick shower, too," he added innocently. "And, you know, I don't seem to be the only one in the room who smells of that particular perfume. Maybe you ought to join me, Trace. Save a little water, do the conservation thing."

His voice was light and teasing, but Tracy could see the exhaustion embedded deeply in the lines on his face. They were both practically asleep on their feet. She reached up and caressed his face with one hand which shook hardly at all.

"Next time." He seemed to understand, and kissed her lightly on the nose before stepping away to pull at his ruined shirt. As he pulled it free and over his head their eyes met again and he winked at her.

"We've got plenty of time."

❑❑❑❑❑

Sure enough, Nick and Natalie were nowhere to be seen, and the adjoining door was shut tight. Tracy closed the bathroom door behind her and leaned happily against it. Vachon was right. They had plenty of time.

❑❑❑❑❑

"Are you sure they're all right?" Nick watched as Natalie put away the last of the now-empty bags she had brought from Toronto. Closing the lid, she sat down on the bed next to him.

"They'll both be fine. Although I have to admit, I wouldn't want to go through that again. We nearly lost Vachon, Nick. For a while there, I was sure we had."

"We're pretty durable. What's that saying? We wobble but we don't fall down?"

Nat laughed, and leaned over to rest her head on his shoulder.

"Yeah, I guess so." She shivered, and he slipped his arm around her.

"Nat?"

"Mmm?"

"I meant what I said."

"You usually do. To which time are you referring?" He looked down into her lovely face. She was concealing a smile.

"I think you know."

"No, I don't think so. Maybe you ought to say it again." She was smiling openly now. "Just to make sure we don't have any more . . . miscommunications."

"Well, I was just going to say . . . I really like you in that color. You ought to wear it more often." Releasing her, he got his feet, concealing a smile of his own.

"Nick!"

"Aand . . ." He held out his hand to her and pulled her to stand next to him. "And I love you, Natalie. More than life itself. You know that, don't you?"

"Yeah, I guess I do. It's just nice to hear, sometimes." Impatiently, she brushed a tear from her eye. "And I really love you. Just—" and she punched playfully at his shoulder "—try to keep out of trouble a little more, huh? I can't afford to keep losing beauty sleep over you."

"You don't need beauty sleep." Standing very close to her, he reached out and took her face in his hands. "Nothing could make you more beautiful, Nat." Bending down, he brushed her lips with his own. "Nothing."

When their kiss ended, Natalie was looking up at him soberly.

"So what happens now, Nick?"

"We keep trying. Look, Nat, I'm never going to be your best bet. The vampire inside me is just too strong. Maybe we'll find a cure. I hope we do. But if not . . ." He trailed off uncertainly.

"We make the best of what we've got," Natalie finished. "That's all any of us can do, Nick, mortal or vampire. Just the best we can."

Nick nodded and pulled her back into his embrace.

"The best we can."

end

My Evil Twin is a Vampire

by Christina Kamnikar

Prologue

For those of you who came in late (Waitaminit! you yell. How can I have come in late?? This is the Prologue! — Patience, Gentle Readers. All will be explained.) please read the following reminders and explanations. Those of you who have managed to discern exactly what I'm going to say may now skip to the story contained in Chapters 1-15. There will not be a pop quiz at the end, but we will expect you to be able to discuss the plot next Monday . . .

Reminders:

Early in the 1990's, the production team of Bedard & Lalonde worked on a Canadian television series built around a present-day vampire.

No, not *Forever Knight.* This is earlier. *Dracula: the Series*, ran for twenty-two half-hour episodes in 1991, telling the story of Count Dracula and his conflict with Gustav van Helsing, grandson of his original nemesis. Count Dracula was played by Geordie Johnson (Jerry Tate in the *FK* episode "My Boyfriend is a Vampire") as an entrepreneur named Alexander Lucard, eager to control the world's wealth and create new vampire converts. Lucard's occasional sidekick and enemy in the series was Gustav's son, Klaus, who was played by . . . Geraint Wyn-Davies. Proving once again that there are only twelve actors in Canada.

Of such coincidences are truly twisted fanfic born.

Explanations:

This was Susan Garrett's birthday present (an annual challenge on FORKNI-L, to give something back to our favorite fanfic author), since I wasn't working on anything else that was even close to being finished; and I figured it was bizarre enough to qualify under the "weird stories" header. Happy Birthday, Susan—I hope you enjoy this at least half as much as I've enjoyed all your stuff.

But enough trivialities. Don't touch that dial—

Go directly to Chapter the First. Do not pass the Raven, do not collect any Ribena . . .

Chapter the First

In a lush penthouse suite somewhere in Toronto, a man is singing in the shower.

"L is for the way, I look, at meeee—"

He is alone, happily getting ready for an evening out. A visitor to Canada, he is enjoying his stay in this very expensive hotel, and looking forward to his plans for . . . Well, that would be telling.

"O is for the only one, you seeeee—"

If any members of the Metro Toronto Police Department were present (and there's no reason why they should be, it's not as if this man is known to Interpol or anything, although he richly deserves to be on several. Wanted posters) they would recognize the singer in question as homicide detective Nick Knight. The handsome blond soaping up his hair and using the nozzle of the showerhead as a microphone is obviously the same man who makes regular spectacular arrests at the 96th, and is currently partnered with Detective Tracy Vetter (Commissioner's daughter, aspiring police chief, and occasional klutz).

"V is for the very—EX-tra-ordinary—"

In fact, this is completely and totally not the case, although Nick Knight's acquaintances could be forgiven the obvious mistake. Klaus van Helsing (for such is the name of our Frank Sinatra impersonator) looks remarkably like Detective Knight. He even sounds like him. This is not due to any diabolical plan or cunning stratagem plotted by God, Fate, Count Dracula, or even the late-night DJ known to Toronto as the Nightcrawler. It is simply a cosmic coincidence.

Nick Knight and Klaus also have one other very important thing in common. They are both vampires. *[Blood-sucking creatures of the night! Parasitic predators who long to sink their teeth into the nearest willing female neck! Charismatic chameleons who look really nice in tuxedos! You get the idea.]* Nick is somewhat less, well, sanguine,

about his condition than Klaus is. He'd really rather be mortal, and be able to date his coroner friend, Natalie Lambert, without worrying about accidentally killing her with an excess of, ummmmm, enthusiasm. Klaus, on the other hand, will throw a temper tantrum if anyone even dares suggest the possibility of becoming mortal (as his human father, Gustav, does, any time he can manage to corner him).

"E! is even more, than anyone that I adore, and—"

The fact that each of these two nosferatus is completely oblivious of the other's existence (even with the small size of the vampire world population, and admitting the fact that Nick knows practically everyone, everywhere, and *even* allowing for Nick's master and creator, Lacroix, being an old acquaintance of Klaus's master, Count Vladimir Dracula) is solely and completely due to the fact that Klaus is much, much younger than the former Chevalier de Brabant. He's only been undead for about sixteen years, and was only alive about twenty-two when he became a vampire. He looks about thirty-five, the age Nicholas was when he was brought across, but that's skillful dressing and acting on his part. Nick is eight hundred years old, but the world *is* a big place; and he hasn't been to Europe, where Klaus spent most of his life, in the last fifty years.

So it isn't, really, all that big a coincidence that neither of them know about the other. Yet.

"LOVE, is all that I can GIVE—to meeeee!"

There is one other major difference between the two men besides their age and attitudes that we should mention at this time. Klaus is certifiably, bona fide, utterly, beyond a doubt, loony toons. Mad. Insane. Cuckoo. He is logical and practical one moment, and then he's giving in to truly silly impulses the next. The sort of man who will shape an elaborate, stunningly complex plot guaranteed to secure him financial security for a hundred years, only to have it sabotaged by his own need to gloat over his victims, or stick a whoopee cushion on the chair of a departing CEO. Despite this, many women find him charming. Animals and small children take one look at him and run in the other direction.

Nick is a bit neurotic, but most of his neurons usually manage to fire in sync. Women also find him charming. And he doesn't hang out with children or animals much (except for Natalie's cat, Sidney, who thinks he's very strange).

"LOVE, is more than just a game for MEEEEE!"

The following story describes what happens when two sets of doppelgangers (for there is another set in this story, which we'll get to in a moment), two master vampires, one mortal coroner, one vampire hunter/deserted father, and one confused homicide detective all meet up in the same city at the same time while Jerry Tate (*The Jerry Show*) is doing an episode called "Separated at Birth!"

"Love was made, for me—and MEEEEEEEE!!!!"

Or, "My Evil Twin is a Vampire!"
Stay tuned.

Chapter the Second

The Nightcrawler was expounding on the concept of identity. It is one of his favorite subjects. The lights of the Raven were pulsing steadily, with a slow, soft melancholy rock ballad threading through the background.

The Raven is not a safe place; it is a bar where anyone walking through the door should be issued a warning booklet of Dos and Don'ts, of what to drink and who not to annoy. Despite this (or because of it?) it attracts a diverse and large clientele of slumming professionals, would-be artistic types, and punk-neo-Goth tough guys. Were we to enter tonight, we (being merely mortal) would be unable to tell the difference between the vampires and the humans; but you can be certain that each of us would be marked as a light midnight snack by those nocturnal predators present.

It was early, yet. But Toronto's favorite late-night radio host already had a visitor.

"It is said that each person is unique. But it is also said that everyone has a double . . . Which side of the argument is correct? . . . Discuss amongst yourselves. Then call us here at the Raven, and perhaps I'll deign to listen to your opinion. Or perhaps not . . . This is the Nightcrawler, my children, and you are listening to CERK, Toronto." The pale blond vampire, perhaps the oldest in Toronto (perhaps the oldest in Canada, or North America) switched off the microphone and smiled at the suited, handsome man leaning against the wall of the control booth, arms stiffly crossed over his chest. "It's good of you to stop by, Alexander."

"How kind of you to say so, Lacroix. Although I admit I would have forgone the pleasure, had I known what your topic of discussion would be this evening." Alexander Lucard—once known as Vladimir, Count Dracula, but in this century and this city, he is Alexander Lucard—raised one eyebrow coolly, studying the older vampire with a certain amount of irritation. "I do not find the subject matter edifying in the least."

"No? Forgive me, but I find your recent discovery most entertaining." Lacroix gave a low chuckle, sipping at his blood-wine, icy eyes twinkling with amused malice. "You take such pleasure in your prestige as a corporate financier. So much pride in maintaining your relative anonymity. To find that you have a double who is a well-known syndicated talk show host must be . . . quite frustrating."

"It's ridiculous," the younger vampire snarled. "Of all the people in the world who could look like me, that it should be that crass, sensationalistic, arrogant buffoon—" Lucard clenched his teeth, and visibly forced himself to control his temper. "I've spent too long building my financial empire to risk it by killing someone who is only an annoyance. However, if I thought I could get away with it . . ."

He let the sentence trail off, and closed his eyes with

weariness. "You have no idea how tiring it is, to sit in those meetings with the Kopviz syndication people and hear the jokes about the resemblance between myself and Jerry Tate. I am a respected businessman. One of the most powerful men in Europe. I have a personal tailor, a net worth in the billions, and the capability to buy and sell a thousand men like him. But because of his notoriety, killing the little insect directly is out of the question. It's maddening, Lucien. Truly maddening."

"I sympathize. Really, I do." Idly, Lacroix studied the crowd outside the control booth. "I myself am dealing with someone I don't dare kill directly. A medical examiner who knows too much. Unfortunately, certain people would connect her . . . disappearance . . . with me, and the consequences would be unpleasant." He paused, seeming to consider what he had just said, several levels of truth and lies going through his head at once. "Alexander. Do you know, I believe we can help each other . . ."

Meanwhile, somewhere close by . . .

In the arena of world communications, Kopviz Interstellar Link is not a big player. KIL has connections through Canada and the Pacific, a few choice syndicated shows, and one gleaming prize of an anchorman. Mid-range value at most. Alexander Lucard wanted the chain for two reasons: it was convenient for his business operations through Alaska and Hawaii, and by this time he fully intended to fire Jerry Tate at the first available opportunity. An everyday business deal, the kind he does over lunch and martinis and forgets about by midnight. Nothing more than that.

Klaus van Helsing wanted KIL for only one reason: to irritate Alexander Lucard.

Most of the things he did of late were calculated to annoy his creator and former master. After all, Lucard would have left him confined in his family crypt for eons if Klaus hadn't been accidentally released. There were his own ambitions for world domination to be taken into account, too. He couldn't very well control the world financial market if Alexander Lucard was still standing.

So following Alexander to Toronto was a foregone conclusion. Paying an unscrupulous private detective to bug the vampire's briefcase, limousine, and penthouse suite was merely routine. And trailing Lucard when he visited an acquaintance downtown was just good business sense.

What the younger vampire had *not* expected when he'd bugged Lucard's briefcase was obtaining murder evidence. Or rather, evidence of a budding conspiracy to commit one or two.

"Decisions, decisions," Klaus murmured to himself, as he eavesdropped on the conversation between Lacroix and Lucard from his limo parked across the street. Should he turn them in now, before anything happened? Or wait until events developed?

Jerry Tate was part of the KIL package, and his loss would sharply reduce the market value of the syndication deal. Lucien Lacroix, though Klaus knew him only by reputation, was supposedly no one to trifle with. And a direct confrontation with Alexander *could* get messy . . .

On the other hand, murder carried a heavier sentence than attempted murder, and he found Jerry Tate almost as irritating as Lucard himself. "Hmmm . . ." An idea was occurring in Klaus's warped brain. It was too vague to grasp, as yet, but soon, soon, he'd have a plan. He always had a plan. It was one of the things he liked best about himself.

Time to wait and see. Watch and wait. Klaus smiled unpleasantly and giggled as he adjusted the sound on the tape recorder. The chauffeur looked back at him uneasily, then paled at his client's glare and hastily averted his eyes. The sound of a grown man giggling can be very frightening when accompanied by the correct kind of glare, and Klaus van Helsing has perfected the technique through *years* of practice.

Chapter the Third

"Knight, Vetter," Captain Reese smiled hesitantly, tapping a folder in his hand, "I've got a new case here which ought to go to somebody else, but I'm going to ask you two to take it on as a personal favor to me."

Exchanging bemused glances, the homicide partners shrugged as one and turned back to their superior officer, no premonitions of disaster hitting either of them (proving once again that vampires are not psychic). Reese looked vaguely apologetic as he handed the folder to the younger detective.

"Why's that, Captain?" Tracy asked, opening the folder.

"And why do you look so nervous?" Nick added, beginning to eye Reese warily. Just then Tracy made a choking sound, and violently threw the folder at her partner's head. Nick caught it, shooting Tracy an amazed glare, and opened it. "What the . . . Oh, no. No way," Knight exclaimed as he read the report, Vetter shaking her head vigorously all the while. "Not a chance. Uh-unh. Not us. Nope. Nooo. Get someone else to do it."

"He asked for you specifically," Reese pleaded. "Said he'd feel safer if he knew you two were on the case. Look, there's some bigshot financier in town who's closing a deal with him, and the guy might be making contributions to the city and government while he's here. We've got to show him what Toronto's Finest are capable of, and protect his investment."

"*Who* would invest in Jerry Tate?" Tracy spluttered.

"Alexander Lucard," Nick said on a falling note, eyes closing in resignation as he read the preliminary report. "Captain . . . you're going to owe us big for this."

"We're not doing it!"

"Get your coat, Tracy."

"I don't want to be anywhere near that slimy, handsy, grabby—"

"We'll discuss it in the car," Nick said, picking up his keys.

Tracy rolled her eyes in frustration and put on her coat as she followed her partner out the door. "Okay. We're doing this. But you have to be the one to interview Jerry. I *mean* it,

Nick . . ."

❑❑❑❑❑

The television station was in chaos. Crew people running everywhere, men in suits tearing their few remaining scalp hairs out by the roots, three sets of twins having hysterics on stage. Jerry Tate, talk-show host, celebrity, and rotten example of manhood, was holding a bag of ice on a long burn along his right arm as a not-unattractive EMT smeared cream on the injury.

"Who's in charge now that Charly's in the mental hospital?" Tracy wondered, stepping back against the wall to give several equipment-bearing young men the room to carry a lighting fixture into the studio.

"Good question. Didn't the report mention someone named Chambers was the new producer?" Nick snagged a passing technician, who pointed them in the direction of the stage, where a middle-aged man in a Jays baseball cap was rubbing tiredly at his eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses.

"Mr. Chambers? I'm Detective Knight, this is Detective Vetter, Metro Homicide. Someone called us about an attempted murder?" The producer smiled in apparent relief, but didn't get a chance to respond.

"*There* you are. What in God's name took you so long?" Jerry Tate tried to stand up, but was firmly pushed back in his seat by the EMT. "Tracy, darling, I'm so glad you're here."

Nick swallowed the chuckle that threatened to erupt at Tracy's sickly, patently false smile. It might be amusing to watch the once-star-struck Tracy try to avoid eye contact with Jerry Tate, but his partner would sock him in the stomach if he showed any sign of how funny he found it. "Mr. Chambers, can you tell us what happened?"

"Someone tried to drop that light—" the producer pointed to a broken lamp in the middle of the set surrounded by scorch marks— "on Jerry in the middle of the rehearsal. Three people saw someone up on the catwalk running away, but we couldn't catch the guy. Luckily, his aim wasn't very good, it just grazed Jer's arm."

"Okay. We'd like to interview the witnesses," Nick said, scanning the milling crowd. He frowned. "How many sets of twins do you have here?"

"Fifteen. It's for the next show, 'Separated at Birth!' And they're not all twins; some of them just bear an amazing resemblance to each other. Like Jerry and Alexander."

"Alexander?" Tracy asked in confusion.

"Lucard," said a voice behind the detectives. Turning, Nick got the familiar feeling that went with confronting another of his kind. No heartbeat, menacing sense of presence, chill in the air—must be a vampire.

Only this vampire was an almost exact double of Jerry Tate. The blue eyes, blond hair, high cheekbones and arrogance were identical. He was a shade paler, and much better dressed. His voice bore a trace of Slavic accent; no other differences were immediately apparent. He was unfamiliar to Nick, but if he had to guess, Knight would have put his age at about half his own.

Tracy gasped, then twisted around to look at Jerry Tate, still sitting on the edge of the set. Meanwhile, Alexander Lucard was staring at Nick with what appeared to be an expression of incredulity, quickly disguised behind an urbane facade. *[For now, Gentle Readers, we will leave the thoughts behind that facade alone; we will probably become more familiar with them than we would wish fairly soon.]*

"Ohmigosh," the younger detective said, looking back and forth between the two identical men. "That's . . . really creepy."

"Do you think so? Personally, I find it marginally amusing," Lucard said in a low, confiding voice, smiling at Vetter. His eyes flicked to Nick's, then away.

"Mr. Lucard here was our inspiration for the show," Jerry said jovially. "You have no idea what a kick it is to find out you have a twin who's one of the richest men on the planet."

The billionaire's covert expression of distaste earned a snicker from Tracy, which she quickly covered by coughing loudly. "Did you witness the attack, Mr. Lucard?"

"No, I didn't, Detective—?"

"Vetter," Nick cut in, narrowing his eyes threateningly at Lucard. "And I'm Nick Knight. Where were you when the attack occurred, if I may ask?"

"You may." Lucard showed his teeth to the other vampire in what was *not* a smile, then turned the genuine article in Tracy's direction. "Somewhere between the editing room and the newsroom, I believe. One of the A.D.'s has been kind enough to give me a tour of the facilities."

"Really." Nick's voice was disbelieving.

"Really." The two men glared at each other. Tracy picked up on the hostility and attempted to defuse it.

"Uhh, Nick, shouldn't we be interviewing the witnesses?"

"Right. Right." Nick smiled blindingly at Lucard, who returned the favor with equal insincerity. "You'll be around if we have to ask you any more questions?"

"Of course. I'm in Toronto for the rest of the week. KIL Communications is currently up for bid, and I like to see what I'm buying before I sign on the dotted line. I'll certainly make myself available to you, Detective Vetter." Lucard smiled charmingly at Tracy, who blushed and nodded like a doll with a spring in her neck.

"Uhhh, thanks," she managed, before Nick dragged her away to interview crew members and separated twins.

Chapter the Fourth

Interviewing witnesses is always time-consuming and frustrating, as any officer of the law can tell you. The stories you hear often bear little relation to reality, but you don't dare blow off any detail given. How much more frustrating is it, then, to try to interview crime scene witnesses who are hysterical and constantly changing their stories; or who want

to check what they saw against what their twin thinks they saw; or who ask you if you've ever been on *COPS?*

"Are *all* Jerry's guests total flakes?"

Tracy Vetter grimaced at her partner's frustrated expression, and flipped her notebook shut. "Kinda looks that way, doesn't it?" She sighed, glancing back over to where Alexander Lucard sat in the studio audience. It still seemed almost unbelievable that someone as tacky as Jerry could have an exact double who was so . . . classy.

Nick was still talking. "A dark figure, possibly a man, with a—" he checked his notes— "quote, 'definite air of menace', unquote, crossed the catwalk, picked up that lamp, threw it down toward the stage, then exited in the other direction and disappeared. Great. Some witnesses!"

"Uh-hmmmm." Jerry Tate had proven to be a womanizer and a shallow boor, and after Tracy and Nick had arrested his former producer, Charly, for committing a string of jealousy-motivated murders, the talk-show host had actually had the nerve to proposition her. The urge to say "as if!" had been very, very strong, but Tracy had settled for telling him she had a boyfriend (okay, Vachon wasn't a boyfriend, he was a friend. A vampire friend. So what? It still put him several yards in front of Jerry Tate in the Singles Stakes).

Funny how Mr. Lucard was so like him, and yet so very different.

"Tracy, will you quit drooling over the billionaire."

"What?"

Nick's annoyed expression was verging on the genuinely perturbed. "You've been looking over at him once every thirty seconds for the last hour. Didn't you learn your lesson with Jerry?"

"He's nothing like Jerry. And what is it with you and Mr. Lucard? You acted like you knew each other." The best defense is a good offense, Tracy could hear her father saying in the back of her mind.

"I've never met him before." Nick was clenching his jaw, always a bad sign. Tracy was sure that her partner was the kind of guy who ground his teeth in his sleep. He probably had ridges on his bicuspids from all that stress.

"But you don't like him."

"I'm not the issue here! You are! Don't you have any sense of self-preservation?" Knight was glaring *and* clenching his jaw now, and adding the kind of look he usually gave witnesses under interrogation who were claiming to be home watching TV on the night of the eighteenth, instead of carving up their boyfriends with butcher knives.

"You are *not* my father, my older brother, my boyfriend, or my boss! And where does my sense of self-preservation enter into this discussion?"

Timing is everything. Whatever answer Nick could have made to his partner's extremely reasonable question was permanently shelved by the reverberating conversation broadcast over the station's PA system two seconds later.

"*mwah mwah, Mwah mwah MWAHMWAHmwah,*" rumbled over the intercom.

"What the . . . ?" Nick and Tracy looked up and around, like the rest of the people present in the auditorium, even though all of them knew that no one was above them; it was just the PA system. Sort of like penguins after the Air Force jet has already buzzed them.

"You have no idea how frustrating it is." Alexander Lucard's ringing tones, rich with irony and depression, came through loud and clear. "Of all the people in the world who could look like me, that it should be that crass, sensationalistic, arrogant buffoon—" Nick slowly turned, his gaze going to the financier sitting like a statue in the audience, his steepled fingers rigid with shock. After the garbled mush of the preceding voice, Lucard's statement was hideously audible. More gibberish answered his taped sentiments— "*mwah, mwah mwah . . . MWAH—*" and after a pause, "I've spent too long building my financial empire to risk it by killing someone who is only an annoyance. However, if I thought I could get away with it . . ." More gargling, and then Lucard's voice saying, ". . . the capability to buy and sell a thousand men like him. But because of his notoriety, killing the little insect directly is out of the question . . ." Lucard's eyes slowly closed, then opened again, seeming darker than before.

On stage, Jerry Tate's face was aghast. "You think I'm an insect?"

Alexander Lucard stood, adjusted the lapels of his Armani, and smiled coolly at the approaching homicide detectives. He waited until they were only a few feet away, then declaimed, "Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?" At Tracy's gaze of incomprehension, he commented, "Henry II. *A Lion in Winter.* Act IV."

"*Becket.* Act V," Nick corrected him, arms crossed over his chest, eyes narrowed as he studied Lucard.

An expression of nausea replaced the confidence that had been on the other man's face a second before. "What?"

"It's from *Becket.* Not *A Lion in Winter.* Same playwright, though." Nick was smiling. It was not a nice smile. Not at all.

"Are you sure?" Lucard abruptly sat down, staring at Nick the whole time. "Pardon me . . . I just had the most awful feeling of deja vu . . ." *Not only does he look terrifyingly like Klaus, now he's pulling the same game of quotation one-upmanship!* Lucard thought, swallowing hard. *Noooo. It can't be a coincidence; appearance is one thing, but this reaction is another! They're in it together, both of them are trying to frame me!* He didn't usually think in exclamation points, but recent events had left the financier off-balance and more than a little paranoid.

Detective Knight was still speaking. "And you may be right, that wanting Jerry Tate dead doesn't mean you did it, but I'd say it looks downright suspi—"

>>BANG!<< *zzzzzzing*

Tracy hit the floor, as did Nick, Lucard, and everyone else to the accompaniment of screams, shouts, glass breaking, and someone yelling "911!"

>>BANG!<< *zzzzzzzzZZZiinnggggg*

"Metro Homicide! Drop your weapon!" Nick was up and running toward the back of the auditorium (without asking her to cover him, Tracy thought in exasperation), gun out, voice deep and macho, like it was every time he pulled this stunt. The shots were coming from the back of the balcony above the

auditorium, where it was too dark to see the shooter.

>>BANG!<< *zzzing!* >>BANG!<<

"OW!" Jerry Tate clutched at his arm—the unburned, unbruised one—in disbelief, and stared down at his shirt and the little hole that was oozing blood. His eyes rolled up in his head, and he toppled to the floor as the various sets of twins had hysterics for the second time in three hours.

Tracy was following her partner—maybe not the smartest thing in the world to do, but she didn't have any better ideas—when she met him coming back in. "Damnit, damnit, damnit, BLOODY HELL, damnit," he swore, and then he added something in French that Tracy didn't think was anatomically possible.

"I didn't know you spoke French," she commented dryly, holstering her weapon as they went back down to the milling frenzy.

Nick blinked and looked abashed, reminding Tracy briefly of Vachon.

"Well now you see, Detective, that I couldn't possibly have done this," Lucard said as they approached him.

"Anyone with as much money as you have could have hired someone," Knight said stubbornly. "At the very least, someone wants to frame you. Someone who overheard your conversation with—?"

"An old, old, friend," Lucard responded, his eyes gleaming wickedly at Nick. By now Tracy was sure of it, they *did* know each other. There were too many cross-currents going on for them not to. Lucard's attitude wasn't doing much to calm her less-than-cool partner, either.

Nick was almost snarling in frustration. "Fine. An old friend. You can tell us all about it down at the precinct."

Up above the stage, Klaus stifled a giggle by pushing a fist into his mouth as far as it would go.

Wasn't *this* an interesting development?

Now, how could he turn it to his advantage . . . ?

Chapter the Fifth

Some days are better than others, and some days don't make it onto the map. Natalie Lambert's day started with a cancelled dinner date—one of her old friends couldn't get a babysitter—then got steadily worse. It was a dark, depressing evening anyway; it was raining when she got up, and the weather hadn't eased any by midnight, when she had to run some reports over to the 96th on the other side of town. Contrary to popular belief, the Coroner's office was *not* the center of exciting activity. On the way into the station, her umbrella got blown inside out, her new coat got soaked, and she walked into the main lobby looking like a drowned cat.

And now she had this vampire staring at her.

[A few notes, re: Natalie Lambert:

Despite being bright, kind, funny, pretty, and possessed of an original fashion sense, Dr. Lambert's social life for the last few years has revolved almost exclusively around dead (and formerly dead) people. Part of this is job-related, of course; part of it is Nick's fault, but not in the way that you probably think. Many of Metro's police force would love to ask out the attractive M.E. for coffee, doughnuts, and maybe the Policeman's Ball. However, it is generally rumored around the locker room that Nick Knight and Natalie Lambert are an item, albeit an unstable, unsteady item, and Detective Knight has a certain reputation—a pretty accurate one, actually—as a man with a quick temper.

So Natalie's nights are more often spent in the company of her cat and a good book than they are tripping the light fantastic, since Nick has this weird hang-up about dating mortals. Aside from the occasional foray to the Raven for one reason or the other, Metro's favorite coroner can't remember the last time she had a date.

The other outcome of this situation is that Dr. Lambert has become very, very good at spotting vampires at fifty paces.

End of our notes.]

The bizarre thing about the vampire standing in the middle of the 96th entrance area—aside from his staring at her—was that he looked *exactly* like Jerry Tate. Well, he was better-dressed. Maybe a little taller. Definitely cuter, but then, Natalie hadn't met a vampire yet who didn't project more charisma than Pierce Brosnan. Being eyed hungrily by vampires had ceased to be immediately unnerving for her years ago, and combined with the really rotten night she was having, it was just enough to push Natalie's already uncertain temper over the edge.

"Do you have some problem?" she asked, flipping wet hair out of her face and spraying water around her as she dumped an armful of file folders onto the reception counter. "Or haven't you ever seen a monsoon victim before?"

To her satisfaction, he blinked at her, slightly disconcerted, before suavely responding, "No, I was just wondering where we'd met. Paris, perhaps? Or was it Hong Kong?" The lamest and oldest of pick-up lines almost sounded sincere when accompanied by a disingenuous smile. Almost.

Natalie traded can-you-believe-this-guy? looks with Norma, the desk clerk, before turning back to squelch the would-be ladykiller (in more senses than one, Nat couldn't help mentally adding). Norma looked slightly envious, but the medical examiner knew better than to expect that he had anything more on his mind than lunch. "I've never been to either place, and if I had, I doubt I would have talked to anyone who was staring at me as rudely as you were."

"What a shame. Surely someone as lovely as yourself has better things to do than deliver paperwork in a downpour." He leaned in toward her, eyes narrowing in what most would interpret as romantic interest, and what Natalie was pretty sure was the look of a man sizing up the meat on the main dish. "Paris can be beautiful this time of year, but I think . . . Rio. Yes, definitely. Wouldn't you rather be on the beach, beneath

the stars, sipping an exotic drink while listening to calypso . . . The sand between your toes, the warm night air—"

"That sounds lovely. And what city will you be visiting?" Natalie interrupted, annoyed both with the blatant come-on and her own reaction to it. *God, I need a vacation. And it's been way too long since I've had to shoot someone down—this creep is almost starting to sound good.*

"Mr. Lucard," Nick's voice cutting into the conversation was a definite relief. For about ten seconds. He'd grasped Lucard's arm and pulled the other vampire around to face him, his eyes taking on the glare they usually had right before they turned yellow and his fangs came out. "The lady doesn't want to be bothered."

Lucard's "oh?" was overlaid with Natalie's "I can speak for myself, Nick," and Tracy Vetter's whispered "Nick! Will you quit manhandling him?" as Knight's partner joined the small group at the reception area. The female detective plastered on a professional smile and added, "Interrogation Room number three is empty, so we can discuss the . . . recent developments in there. If you'll step this way?" Knight lingered at the reception counter for a few seconds as Tracy ushered Lucard down the hallway.

"Why was he talking to you?" Nick demanded, dissolving whatever gratitude Natalie felt at being rescued from the situation.

"Oh, I don't know, Nick, maybe he was just looking for someone to cut up some corpses for him!" the coroner hissed, slamming some files around before she got control of herself. "Why is he here, anyway? Usually your 'friends' make it a point to avoid the police station."

"He is *not* my friend," Knight responded hotly. At Natalie's raised eyebrows, he shrugged uncomfortably. "More of an acquaintance of an acquaintance of an acquaintance," he mumbled. Taking a deep breath, he added, "He's being held for questioning in the attempted shooting of Jerry Tate."

The M.E. stopped cold, working out the implications of that, then couldn't help but giggle. "You're kidding me, right? I mean, c'mon, Nick—" One thing Natalie had learned about vampire murders and murderers was that most of them preferred the "hands-on" approach. The idea that any of Nick's brethren would use a gun and be clumsy enough to get caught was one that her brain simply refused to take seriously.

"Knight? Would you mind joining us?" Tracy's strident question cut across the usual station noise, and by the tone, Commissioner's Daughter Vetter was about to pitch a fit if her partner didn't get his butt into the interrogation room. Pronto.

"Oooo, she's using your last name. You're in for it now," Natalie laughed, her bad mood washed away by the innate ridiculousness of the latest case and Nick's earlier possessiveness. Who the hell was he, to ask why strange vampires were talking to her? She had the silliest impulse to tell him that she and Lucard were secretly planning on running away to Switzerland, to start a clinic for reformed vampires together, and use the proceeds to open similar outlets all over the world. But as Nick stomped off to join his partner, her levity drained away, leaving a sense of frustration. Damnit. Rio really *did* sound good. Why hadn't he ever asked her if she'd like to take a trip somewhere fun? Why hadn't . . .

With the ease of long practice, Dr. Lambert slammed the lid on such speculations and went in search of Captain Reese, despite the angry rumblings from her subdued subconscious.

But the seeds of some new ideas were already germinating in the dark . . .

Chapter the Sixth

"Freeze!"

Shades in place, leather jacket zipped up, hair styled with cool gel—Klaus could get into this cop mode. The gun pointed at the mirror was a .357 Magnum; after he took out Knight, he'd have a real policeman's gun, but everything else was perfect. Lip curling just a little bit, he snarled, "Metro Homicide! Put down the weapon!" Pausing, he frowned consideringly, then punched the "play" button on the nearby tape-recorder.

"Freeze! Metro Homicide! Put down your weapon!" barked Detective Knight on the tape. Klaus snapped his fingers, mumbling "your weapon, *your* weapon" then went through the motions again. Nodding in satisfaction, he threw the sunglasses down on the hotel room bureau as he reached for the ringing cellular phone.

"Van Helsing. What do you have to report?"

"Mr. Lucard just left the 96th. They're on their way back to the hotel."

"Good. Stay with them. Keep me informed of Lucard's movements." Disconnecting, Klaus smiled at his reflection, pointing the gun at the mirror one last time. "Nicholas Knight, you are about to be eliminated." Blowing imaginary smoke off the weapon's barrel, he chuckled, then punched in a new number on the cellular. "Detective Knight, please," he requested, making his voice old and shaky, with the trace of an Austrian accent.

"Knight here," said his double upon answering the phone. Klaus punched another button on the tape recorder, and started fabricating.

"I believe you are the person to talk to about the shooting at the television station this afternoon, involving Jerry Tate—and Alexander Lucard?"

"Yes, that's right." How eager he sounded! A man after Klaus's own heart. "Do you have some information for us?"

"You understand, I'm uneasy about coming forward." Klaus made faces at himself in the mirror, first threatening, then reassuring, seguing from anger to contempt to disbelief—every expression he'd had a chance to observe on the homicide detective. Pity the range was so limited. "I want to meet you at a safe place . . ."

"Where?"

"King's Cross Cemetery. Near the old Vandeville crypt? As soon as possible? I realize how melodramatic this must sound, but I'll feel safer once I know the police have the evidence I've gathered."

"Of course. Mr . . . ?"

"Van Helsing. Gustav van Helsing."

A pause, and then, in a slightly higher voice, "Van Helsing?"

"Yes. Is there a problem?"

"No, no. No problem. It just reminded me of . . . someone I'd heard of. I'll meet you at King's Cross in an hour. Thank you for coming forward, Mr. van Helsing."

"Thank *you*, Detective Knight. I feel much more reassured, now that I've spoken with you. Good-bye." Klaus hung up the phone, howling with laughter as he lay down on the bed and kicked his heels. Sighing and hiccuping a little as he calmed down, he muttered, "I kill myself." He punched in another number off-handedly, then added aloud, "Almost literally, sometimes."

"Gustav van Helsing here," answered a suspicious voice on the other end.

"Mr. van Helsing. This is Detective Nick Knight. I'm afraid what I have to tell you will be shocking. Incredible, even. But I'm hoping you'll take me seriously." All traces of

amusement were gone now, and he'd assumed the calm, authoritative voice of Nick Knight without a hitch. This was going to be a piece of cake. Nobody would suspect.

"What is this about, Detective? Which part of the police force are you with?"

Klaus grimaced, cursing silently. Should've remembered to say that part first. Oh, well. "Metro Toronto Homicide. We have reason to believe your son is involved in a string of murders on the south side of town. They're very—disturbing."

"Oh, no. Oh, Klaus, what have you done now?" the old man breathed. Klaus stuck out his tongue at the receiver. Moralistic old fool. Always trying to ruin his fun, make him mortal again. Well, that would work to his advantage this time.

"Sir, I'm calling you because I believe you can deal with your son as no one else can." The vampire paused for dramatic emphasis, then said, "Your son is—not normal. If you could convince him to turn himself in, I believe we could reduce the sentence. If not . . . I should tell you that we're going to arrest him within an hour at King's Cross Cemetery. We think he's hiding there, in the Vandeville crypt."

"Thank you, Detective Knight. I promise my son shall be . . . dealt with . . ." The man on the other end of the phone paused. "By me. Incidentally, how did you get this number?"

Klaus's eyes widened, then he raised his eyebrows as he lied. "Police privilege. Reverse directory. Interpol tip-off. It's hush-hush, you know." Actually, it was one of the million things he kept track of as a matter of course, so as to better avoid his obsessed parent. The last thing he needed was to be re-mortalized without any notice.

"Oh, of course," responded the elder Van Helsing abstractedly. "Thank you again, Detective Knight." He hung up, while his estranged son smiled beatifically and lay back on the bed, content.

Klaus giggled suddenly, unable to stop himself. Perfect. He paused, considering his course of action. Yes, he'd definitely have to watch the proceedings. From a discreet distance, of course. No sense letting Knight know he was around.

Just in case events needed a little . . . push.

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Nick squinted around the entrance of the old Vandeville crypt, replaying the telephone conversation in his mind. Had Van Helsing said *near* the crypt, or *in* the crypt? There didn't appear to be anyone around, and he could almost make out something inside the mausoleum. It was bad enough that he was meeting a known vampire hunter about Lucard's involvement in the Tate case; now said hunter had failed to show up, and Nick was getting uneasy. Cemeteries were never his favorite places anyway.

He checked his watch again, frowning. Well, one quick check inside, and then he was gone, informant or no informant.

Like many a young, bikini-clad bimbo in a horror film, Nick obviously wasn't listening to the background music. If he had been, he would have heard it build, and build, and practically scream "No, Nick, no! Don't go in the crypt!"

What he *did* hear was the *clank* of the gate behind him as Gustav van Helsing shut the door, having emerged from his hiding place above the crypt. "I'm doing this for your own good, Klaus," the old man said sorrowfully. Nick whirled to see a sad-eyed old man locking the iron bars, and placing a large crucifix on the door. "The police will believe you couldn't lock yourself in here, so they'll stop looking for their murder suspect . . . and this way, you'll be safe until I can find a cure."

"What??" Nick whooooooshed over to the door and tried to open it, getting an electrical shock when he tried. "OW! What did you do to this? Let me out of here, Van Helsing!"

"No. Not until I find a cure. The door is charged from the force of the cross. Only one who is truly pure of heart can remove it."

Nick smiled, trying to calm down and make the man see reason. "Look, actually, I want to be cured. That's fine. Just let me out of here. And why do you keep calling me Klaus?"

"What should I call you? Dracula? Alexander Lucard?" Van Helsing shook his head ruefully. "Do you really think I'd believe your repentant act, my son? You've tried that ruse before." He patted the bars. "No, once I put this stone door back in place, you'll be safe in here until I find the cure. I promise, Klaus."

"No, WAIT—" Thud. Nick stared at the stone wall on the other side of the bars. "My name isn't Klaus!!!!" He tried to grab the gate again, got another shock for his pains, and backed away from the door, shaking his hands to get rid of the pins-and-needles feeling, his lips a thin line of anger.

Who the hell was this Klaus guy, anyway?

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"Nice going, Dad," Klaus commented. "Very nice." He watched his father hail a taxi and drive away. If the elder Van Helsing had any brains—and he did, despite his obsessive-compulsive behavior—he'd be on a plane to Vienna within the hour. And no one in the city would be left to know that there were two Nick Knights running around. Or, well, not anymore. He giggled, approaching the aqua Cadillac that Knight had driven to the cemetery. Too bad he hadn't gotten Knight's gun, but he'd make do with his Magnum.

Hmmm. Now, if he were Knight, where would he keep his extra set of keys?

Chapter the Seventh

Late in the shift, Tracy looked up from her computer to catch her partner almost bouncing into the squad room, and smiling like he'd won the lottery as he dropped into the chair across from her. "What put you in such a good mood? Did the tip pay off?"

"Yes . . . and no." Klaus's grin widened. "Let's just say that I expect good things to come from it." His expression altered as he suddenly became all concentration. "Lucard's probably still looking for a way to eliminate Jerry. We should probably put him under police protection for a while."

Vetter sighed, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms as she studied her partner. "The TV station already sprang for bodyguards, so he should be safe for now. What *I* don't understand is why you're so certain that Alexander Lucard had something to do with it."

Tracy thought Nick looked taken aback, but he glibly responded, "I should think that would be obvious. The tape at the station—"

"We went over this with Mr. Lucard!" Tracy's lips thinned in annoyance as she went on. "Someone is trying to frame him, Nick. Everything points to it; the broadcasting of the tape, the timing of the shots—"

"He's just trying to throw us off the scent, that's all," the other detective said, waving his hand in a dismissive gesture. "What we have to do is find the shooter, and the rest of that tape." Klaus grinned as he ostensibly studied the file in front of him, silently chortling over his success in replacing Knight. His juvenile partner didn't suspect anything was wrong, and now Klaus was in the perfect position to complete his preparations for humiliating Alexander.

"I still think there's something you're not telling me." Tracy glared at her partner, who was humming under his breath as he thumbed through the file. "Where do you know Mr. Lucard from?"

"Um?" Klaus stopped humming, and glared back at her. "I never said I knew him. I don't know him." He irritably slapped the folder shut. "Don't ask me that. Why are you asking me that?"

"Because you're acting weird, Nick. Weirder than usual. You haven't even acknowledged the possibility that anyone else could want to kill Jerry Tate!" Tracy's voice rose as her partner's eyes narrowed and became cold. "I'm serious. We have to at least *consider* that someone else might have done this."

"Why?" Knight was staring at her in fascination.

Tracy blinked, caught off-guard by the stupidity of the question. "Why? Because that's our job, Nick. What do you mean, why? I can't believe—"

Nick's phone rang and Klaus answered it while tapping a pencil on the desk and glaring at Tracy, who was still glowering at him. "Knight here."

"Nick? It's Natalie. I have the results from the O'Brian autopsy here, and there's a few other things I have to go over with you. Can you come down here before the end of your shift?"

Klaus stopped tapping the pencil for a moment, his mind shifting into overdrive as he tried to grasp the implications of the call. "It can't wait? We're sort of in the middle of something here—" Who was Natalie? Well, an M.E., obviously. But his quick survey of Knight's life hadn't included any personal details; and he was on a first-name basis with this woman. Were they friends, as well as co-workers? This could get sticky . . . The pencil started tapping again, only faster.

"No, it *can't* wait." Whoever this Natalie was, she didn't sound like the type to take no for an answer. Well, he'd just have to wing it.

"All right, I'll be there before my shift ends."

"Thanks. Oh, and Nick—"

"Yup?"

"I have a new protein shake for you to try. I think I got the flavoring right this time, too."

"Protein shake?" Klaus frowned at the phone, carefully controlling his confusion so his partner wouldn't pick up on it. Natalie seemed to take it as a protest.

"Don't be like that until you've tried it. It tastes like blood to *me*, so hopefully you'll be able to stomach it." Klaus dropped his pencil in shock as Natalie-the-M.E. kept talking. "If I'm right and your need for blood is partly psychological, maybe this will help."

"Really?" Van Helsing responded weakly. "That's . . . great. Uh, gotta go, Natalie. I'll see you soon." He hung up the phone very gingerly, as if it were a bomb about to explode, then just stared at it for a few moments. "Tracy?"

"What?" Vetter was still annoyed with him, but right now that was the least of his problems.

"What do you think of Natalie?"

Tracy gave him another sanity-questioning look. "What kind of question is that?"

"A perfectly reasonable one," Klaus replied defensively. He *had* to know a bit more about this woman before he walked into her morgue. What was Knight *into*? Protein shakes? Blood taste? Had he confided that he was a vampire to this woman? Maybe this wasn't going to be as easy as he'd thought it would be.

Tracy sighed and turned back to her computer, entering data without looking at her partner. "I like her. She's smart. Nice. A terrific M.E. Why she puts up with *you* though, I don't know."

"Puts up with me?" Klaus repeated in an offended tone.

"You have to admit, partner, you're kind of . . . eccentric." Tracy smiled, her mood lightening as she needled Klaus. "And moody. Not to mention intense. Did I mention you always think you're the only one allowed to be right?"

"Forget I asked," Klaus responded dryly. Great. Knight was a jerk. Whoever Natalie was, she couldn't be very interesting if she was hanging out with *him*. And if she knew too much about vampires—

He bounced up from the chair, humming under his breath as he headed for the door. It had been too long since he'd had a good excuse to indulge himself, and this just might be it. "I'll be at the morgue for the rest of the shift. See you tomorrow, Tracy. Oh, and Tracy?" Vetter glanced up from her computer inquiringly, and Klaus smiled wickedly at her. "I'm still right about Lucard. I'll prove it to you, just wait."

Tracy watched her partner bound out of the station and wondered if switching to decaf this week had been a wise decision. It was beginning to look like she'd need the extra jolt just to cope with Nick's new hyper side. "Great. Why did he have to become manic during *this* case?"

Chapter the Eighth

Love at first sight doesn't really happen, of course. The gut-level, heart-pounding attraction individuals sometimes feel upon first meeting someone they think they love is a complex reaction of pheromones, early conditioning, pre-programmed genetic imperatives, and bad media cliches. Even when the victim of the infatuation is a vampire. So, Dear Reader, when I tell you that Klaus van Helsing fell in love with Natalie Lambert at first sight, you will understand that it was *not* love. No. We know better than that, even if Klaus doesn't.

But is it just a vampire's attraction to a potential victim? Perhaps not. Natalie is mortal, and Klaus is a vampire, so that is undoubtedly part of the equation. But there are other forces at work here: madness, self-destruction, loneliness, ego, challenge, competition, and a mutual affinity for cartoons. None of these impulses should be underestimated.

Klaus had been teetering between a combination of curiosity and annoyance as he headed over to the Toronto Morgue. Driving Knight's car was a lot of fun, and he'd enjoyed drag-racing away from a couple of lights, but he couldn't entirely forget the strange phone conversation he'd had with Dr. Lambert before he left. Would he give himself away? Would she so annoy him with her talk of pursuing mortality that he'd have to kill her? And if so, would that complicate his plans for framing Lucard? Questions, questions. Klaus hated uncertainty, and even more, he hated not having enough information. Overall, he was leaning toward breaking the medical examiner's neck as soon as they met.

"Pull up a slab," Natalie said as he walked in, not looking up from her dissection of a bludgeoning victim. "I have to finish taking care of Wile E. Coyote here."

Klaus blinked in surprise, staring at the petite brunette casually sewing up the top of a man's brain. Whatever preconceptions he'd had about someone who hung out with Nicholas Knight and played with blood-flavored shakes went out the window. "Wile E. Coyote?" He glanced at the man on the table, then grinned. "He does kind of look like someone dropped an Acme anvil on him."

"Just about. Only in his case, it was a gargoyle."

"You're kidding. Really?" Klaus was enchanted. Natalie Lambert looked like a cartoon herself, one of those *anime* girls with the huge eyes and little mouths, and her honey-brown hair was going every which way, and she smelled nice, kind of like orchids and cherries dipped in formaldehyde. Much better than he'd been anticipating. "How's the gargoyle?"

"Decapitated. Very sad." Natalie grinned, and closed the top of Wile E.'s head. "The notes from the O'Brian case are over on the counter. And the shake is in the fridge." At Klaus's involuntary expression of revulsion, she scolded "Don't be like that. Try it first before you make any judgments. How else are you going to become human again?"

"Yes, Mommy," Klaus teased, bouncing over to the refrigerator. Natalie stuck her tongue out at him, and the vampire got a little thrill up his spine. What was someone so yummy doing hanging out with a loser like Knight?

"How's the Jerry Tate case going?" Dr. Lambert was shedding her lab coat and heading over to her desk, watching him to make sure he drank the shake. Klaus sniffed the container warily. It *did* smell like blood. He looked over to where Dr. Lambert—Natalie—was sitting, thought, *the things I do to impress women!* and took a sip. He gagged at the taste but manfully chugged it, remembering the tequila shots he'd done when he was a mortal. "And how's the shake?"

"Too salty," he rasped, making little hacking sounds.

Natalie was smiling, though. "But you managed to finish it! I don't think you've ever done that in one sitting before!"

Mentally sneering at that wimp Knight (whose previous experience with the M.E.'s concoctions made him warier than Klaus), Van Helsing shrugged modestly and said, "Well, it's not bad. I think you're getting closer."

"I hope so," Natalie said with an undertone of wistfulness.

She looked tired, Klaus thought, and wondered again about Nick's relationship to Dr. Lambert. Why was she helping Knight become mortal? And how much could he get away with here? Maybe he could get more information out of her about Knight. Setting the glass down on the counter, he crossed the room to the seated coroner and tentatively trailed his hand over her shoulders. "You seem tense." Very carefully he started to knead her neck, putting juuuust enough pressure on the muscles to loosen them, but not enough to hurt. Instead of pulling away, Natalie's head dropped forward and she let out a little whimper of relief.

"Oh, God, that feels good," she muttered softly. "You were . . . mmm . . . going to tell me about the . . . ow! right—there, yeah . . . Tate case."

"Not much to tell. Lucard's guilty, we just have to prove it," Klaus said cautiously, staring down at the M.E.'s neck. It was very pretty neck . . .

"Funny. He didn't seem like the type to shoot a mortal," Natalie murmured. The vampire's fingers froze in shock for a second at that information, then resumed their gentle massage as she kept talking. "Bite them, yes. But shoot them? Especially Jerry Tate. Why? It's so dumb, Nick . . ."

Klaus leaned forward to whisper in her ear, the scent of her blood so close to the surface that he had to fight the urge to bite her right then and there. "His ego can't stand having Jerry Tate for a twin. The almighty Dracula can not possibly have a double who is so undeniably crass."

"He's Dracula?" Natalie's head came up like a shot, nearly hitting Klaus in the chin, and she turned around in her chair, leaning back a bit when she saw how close Van Helsing was standing. "*Count* Dracula? I was propositioned by Count Dracula?!"

"He propositioned you? That swine," Klaus snarled, ready to kill the other vampire for even thinking about it. Alexander and Natalie? What a disgusting concept. She was much too good for him. Too cute. Too—sane, yes, that, definitely. *And* she had a good sense of humor. Dracula wouldn't know a Loony Toon if one whacked him with a sledgehammer.

Natalie was giggling at his expression. "Nick, get serious. I'm sure he hits on almost every mortal he meets, especially considering I looked like a drowned rat at the time." She frowned suddenly, her jaw hardening as she studied Klaus. "Besides, it's not like anyone else is offering me trips to Rio de Janeiro."

"You wouldn't!" Klaus was aghast.

"It could be fun," the coroner mused, an evil glint in her eyes. "I mean, as long as he respected some ground rules—"

Van Helsing was just about to start ranting at her about the control freak tendencies and boring conservatism of his former master, when he realized she wasn't serious. "Don't joke about stuff like that, Natalie. He might kidnap you, or hold you captive, or . . . or . . . bring you across, or something!" Klaus took a moment to catch his breath, and tried to think of a sufficiently Knight-like utterance to divert her attention with, when something else she'd said clicked in his brain. "You want to go to Rio? *I'll* take you to Rio, if that's what you want!"

"Nick—" Natalie looked weary again, and slightly remorseful. "I didn't mean—"

"No," Klaus interrupted, taking both her hands in his, slowly caressing them. "You deserve it, if that's what you want." Quite against his will, he found himself being utterly sincere. "You've done so much for N-me; always looking for a cure, and helping me with cases, and . . ." *Might as well go for broke* ". . . I'd really like to take you there. I'd like to be—somewhere else, outside of Toronto, with you. Alone."

"Oh," the M.E. responded weakly. She was staring up at Klaus with those big eyes, and Van Helsing started leaning toward her, able to smell her blood, wondering what her lips would taste like, and he really, really, really didn't mean for it to happen, but an instant later he was kissing her. With feeling. A *lot* of feeling.

Natalie broke the kiss with a gasp, gulping for air. "Sorry about that," Klaus apologized, mentally kicking himself for forgetting that mortals needed to breathe.

"Don't be," Natalie responded, then pulled him into another passionate kiss.

Several blissful moments later, Klaus could hear coughing behind him, and Natalie broke away again, her cheeks violently red as she smiled weakly at the person who'd interrupted them. "Tracy! Hi!"

Van Helsing turned and glared at his so-called partner. "Don't you know anything about timing?" he asked.

"Not as much as you do, apparently," Vetter responded with raised eyebrows and a small smirk.

"Nick was just—uh—" the M.E. stuttered, one hand fanning her burning cheeks.

"Making dinner arrangements for my night off," Klaus said smoothly, one hand still possessively holding Natalie's. "Right?" he asked, putting as much pleading as he was capable of in his expression.

"But what about—" Natalie made a small, futile gesture toward her neck, then relented at the continued silent entreaty from Van Helsing. "Okay, how about the CN Tower?" she challenged.

"Perfect. I have to work tomorrow night, but I'm free the evening after that?" Klaus crossed his fingers, hoping he wouldn't have to wait any longer than that to get Natalie alone again.

"We'll talk first," Natalie said in a determined voice. "About . . . you know . . . things." She glared at the all-too-present Tracy Vetter, who seemed highly entertained by the conversation.

"Of course."

"And you'll eat something at the restaurant. Something on the menu," the M.E. added significantly.

"I'll eat whatever you order for me."

"And . . . uh . . ." Natalie swallowed, staring at the vampire dazedly. "I forget what else. Are you sure about this, Nick?" She couldn't seem to believe they were going out on a simple date. Knight really *was* hopeless, Klaus thought smugly.

"I'll pick you up at eight, is that enough time for you to get ready?"

"Sure." The coroner nodded, appearing happy but stunned.

Klaus took advantage of her confusion to kiss her again real fast. Then he spun around, startling Tracy into stumbling backwards, grabbed the file Natalie had prepared for him, and began singing, "Mona Lisa, Mona Lisa, I adore you—" as he galloped out the exit.

Behind him he left two very disoriented women, one of whom said to the other, "Men. Just when I think I have them figured out . . . not that I'm complaining, you understand . . ."

Chapter the Ninth

And what, you may ask, has Count Dracula been up to since we saw him last?

Not as much as you'd think. Alexander Lucard is a businessman, first and foremost, in much the same way that Al Capone and Michael Corleone were businessmen. The former scourge of Transylvania had been busy doing damage control since his little "consultation" with the Toronto P.D., and taking steps to secure his position as KIL Communications' main bidder. But the unforeseen strangeness that had complicated his life had also convinced him that he must try to ascertain who, exactly, was playing havoc with his visit to Canada.

Which is why he called his good friend, his trusted friend, his *kind* friend Lucien Lacroix, and arranged for a meeting to ask him for an explanation of recent events. Or at the very least, a reality check.

"Lacroix," Lucard demanded once the older vampire was inside the graveyard where they were meeting *[a pity it isn't the one where Nick is being held captive; but then there would be no Chapters 10-15 in this story, would there?]*, "you have a lot of explaining to do."

"*Do* I?" The Nightcrawler was not used to being addressed this way by anyone outside his immediate family,

and he didn't tolerate it from them, either. "What seems to need explaining, Alexander? Aside from the risk you are running by speaking to me so rudely?"

"Why aren't you acting as we planned?" Lucard was pacing over some of the older graves in the St. Lawrence cemetery—just down the avenue from Klaus's henchmen in an unmarked van, where various tape machines were whirring and clicking and recording—snapping his fingers in frustration as he glared at the older vampire. Both of them felt relatively safe in this deserted part of town, and the concept of directional mikes never entered either of their heads, although it really should have. But even hundred and thousand-year-old vampires have their weak spots, and for both of these two, too much reliance on their vampiric nature had blinded them to some of the technological possibilities available on the market for professional eavesdroppers. "Why is Jerry Tate still alive? Why are you trying to frame me for his murder? And *what* was going through your mind when you planted a Klaus impersonator in the police department?" Briefly, his eyes glowed gold in frustration, and then he had himself under control.

"You're babbling, Alexander." Lacroix's voice was compassionate. "So I will humor you. For now." A long pause, during which Lacroix scanned their surroundings with distaste, wiped off a gravestone, then perched on it. "Mr. Tate is still alive because my plans for his demise are proceeding cautiously. But they will soon bear fruit. Try to remain patient." Another pause, as Lacroix inspected a sentimental verse on the marker opposite, grimacing in annoyance. "I am not 'trying' to frame you for anything. I do not 'try' to do things. I do them." Lucard frowned, attempting to remember what play Lacroix was quoting, but the older vampire was still talking. "As for this Klaus person, I know nothing of him. My only contact with the police department is through the beat patrolmen with whom I have certain arrangements regarding my club, and my son, who has decided to take his hobby of self-flagellation to new heights. Is there anything else?"

"Your son?" Lucard was still confused, but doing his best to hide it. The Roman might have been lying, but it was unlikely, and if he was to be honest with himself, Alexander was only *hoping* that the solution to his problems would be as simple as some practical joke being played by Lacroix. An uglier (and much more plausible) possibility was beginning to suggest itself.

"Nicholas. My son." Lacroix was speaking as if to a somewhat dim child. "I've spoken of him often. The one who wishes to become mortal? You may have encountered him . . . He is calling himself Nicholas Knight."

Alexander sat down on the nearest gravestone—a rather ornate cherub cuddling a sheep—completely stunned at the coincidence. "We've met. He's a dead ringer for *my* fledgling, Klaus van Helsing. I assumed that you were responsible—"

"Van Helsing?" There was an edge of discomfort to Lacroix's voice. "Is he related to—"

"Yes. Klaus is the original Van Helsing's great-grandson. His father is one of my more stubborn detractors back in the Old Country." Lucard's brow creased in thought. "There must be some connection you've missed, Lacroix—your son taunted me in exactly the same way Klaus does. And he seems determined to hang me for the recent attempts on that cockroach Tate's life, even though he must know I'm not responsible."

"Nicholas is bit of a fanatic, I'm afraid. Any scent of wrongdoing sends him scurrying for handcuffs and legal writs. But if Klaus is the child you have described with such frustration, my son would have nothing to do with him. He has his faults, but consorting with madmen is not one of them." A note of casual interest crept into the Nightcrawler's voice as he added, "Enough of this. My plans are taking shape. How are *your* arrangements for Natalie Lambert's demise developing?"

Lucard got up and began to pace again. "I'm considering my options. Tell me, Lacroix, why are you so interested in seeing her dead?" Lacroix made a sound of annoyed surprise, but the financier continued to talk over the other's interruption. "I found her quite charming when we met at the police station. And discreet. She could have exposed me, or caused me difficulties, but she did not. Her choice of companions, of course, left something to be desired—" The vampire stopped in his tracks, a low smile forming as he began to understand. "She's helping your son become mortal again, isn't she? That's why you want her dead. Not because she knows too much; but because of what she might do. And Nicholas would happily throttle you if you tried to kill her directly."

"He can be rather unreasonable when it comes to his pets."

"Why not simply bring her across?"

"What? And have her at Nicholas's side forever? Always telling him he's right to keep trying for mortality, always defending him, always taking his side against *me*?" Lacroix was incensed. "You know how difficult new children can be when they first come across. She's a resistor, a moralizing scientist, and a pain in the neck. The *last* thing I want is for her to become immortal!"

"And besides that, Nicholas would never forgive you." Lucard was definitely amused, as well as intrigued. Anyone who can get under Lacroix's skin so thoroughly was worth a second look . . . Not that the first look was so unpleasant.

"That is beside the point," the older vampire stated irritably. "Which is that we have a deal, Alexander. See that you remember it." He stood and abruptly departed into the night sky, leaving Lucard enlightened on several minor points, but still in the dark on the rather major ones. Frowning, he walked out of the cemetery and slowly made his way back to his hotel.

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A few hours later, after he listened to the end of this conversation on tape, Klaus smiled, humming "Hotel California" under his breath as he punched a number into his phone. *After all, I have to make this look legitimate for 'Detective Knight' . . . if anyone checks, the phone records will back me up.* The answering machine at the precinct kicked in after three rings. "'Ello, Detective Knight?" A French accent this time, reminiscent of Inspector Clouseau. "I have a teep for yooou . . ."

Chapter the Tenth

It was getting close to 4 a.m. when Klaus finally got his warrant to search Alexander Lucard's penthouse suite. Part of the problem had been getting the wording on the warrant just right, to include not only illegal listening devices, tape recorders, and microphones, but "evidence pertaining to the shooting of Jerry Tate", a list which included the gun used to shoot the talk-show host, computer records of Lucard's Toronto money transactions, e-mail, as well as his phone records and appointment book. The logic Klaus used to justify this with Captain Reese and the judge was that if someone was trying to frame Lucard, they'd obviously leave evidence behind, and that evidence would lead them to the real killer. Reese couldn't put his finger on exactly why that sounded so fishy, except that it did. Or maybe it was the way Knight had explained it, with that strange half-smile that kept slipping out at odd moments.

"Well, you've got your warrant." Reese handed the paper to Knight, who skimmed it and then chortled. The captain exchanged a dubious look with Knight's partner, who seemed more tired than usual. "Just try not to upset the guy, okay? Lucard's got a lot of clout, and more trouble on this case we do not need. Understood?"

"Perfectly, Captain," Knight responded with an innocent expression that didn't quite disguise his cheerfulness. "It'll be completely by the book. By the numbers. Straight up. No problem!"

"Great," Reese said, watching Knight drag his partner out of the precinct, "That'll be a switch." Had Nick always been this upbeat about search-and-seizure, or was he working on one of his intermittent hunches? Whatever it was, the captain wished he'd get over it. Just watching the guy zip around like that was making him tired.

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As was mentioned in Chapter 9 (and you surely can't have forgotten it so soon) Lucard was by now fairly certain about the identity of the person responsible for his latest embarrassment with the Toronto Police Department. However, that fact in no way prepared him for the sight of Klaus standing in the penthouse suite doorway an hour before dawn, ordering around uniformed officers with snappy phrases like "search everything" and "leave no stone unturned" and "remember to wear those plastic gloves". A few of the officers were muttering under their breaths in annoyance.

"Klaus????" The name slipped out before Dracula could call it back, but no one aside from his erstwhile protege seemed to notice it. It was definitely Van Helsing. Aside from the fact that he could now sense the vampire in the leather jacket through the connection between vampire parent and child (a connection which had been missing when he met Nicholas Knight), Knight had a much older and wearier air about him than that of Lucard's frenetic offspring, whose antics had made Alexander's life so difficult in Vienna. Where was Knight? What was going on?

"You'll have to excuse us, Mr. Lucard," Klaus responded suavely as he unscrewed the mouthpiece to the phone receiver and made a show of checking it for listening devices. "But we've decided that the best way to catch our killer is through you. And unfortunately, *some* people at headquarters need to be convinced of your innocence. The warrant's in order, I showed it to your valet and the hotel management." He replaced the mouthpiece and then put the phone back with a resounding clack. Steely-eyed, he surveyed the efforts of the other officers, and noticing that Tracy was in the adjoining room, he turned back to Lucard, whispering in what was evidently meant to be a convincing tone, "Relax. I've got it covered. There's no way they'll convict you."

"What have you done with Knight?" Lucard snarled in a barely audible whisper. "And who do you think you're kidding, Klaus? I *knew* it was you—"

"Then why didn't you stop me?" Klaus whispered back with a little giggle, abandoning his pose of camaraderie. "Oh, that's right. You couldn't. Can't give the whole vampire thing away to the cops, can we? Darn!" He backed up a step, and resumed his persona as "Detective Knight". "Have you found anything yet, gentlemen?"

"We've got a copy of the e-mail messages, sir. One of these looks incriminating," one of the uniforms responded. "Something about arrangements for a demise—"

Van Helsing's eyes widened in mock alarm, then he stalked over to the beat cop, taking the printout from her with an intense "hmmmm". He glanced over the page, then looked slyly at Lucard. "Mr. Lucard, who else has access to your laptop?"

"No one," Dracula responded coldly. "But I'm certain that if there is something incriminating, *someone* hacked into my files and placed it there—"

"Any ideas who that someone would be?" Klaus asked, fighting to keep a straight face. Dracula's nostrils flared, and Van Helsing saw his former master's eyes glow yellow for a split second before he regained his self-control. "Anyone at all?"

"I have many business enemies, Detective 'Knight'. Including one of my former associates, Klaus van Helsing—"

"Yes, yes, yes." Klaus waved an impatient hand at him, the one with the printout in it, almost smacking the nearby policewoman in the eye. "But your having too many enemies is almost as useful to us as having *no* enemies, if you see what I mean." He crossed his arms, looking pensive. "You see, in the police business, we have to look for motive. Who benefits? Who gets paid? Who gets paid off? Who gets lucky? Who—" Klaus shook his head and got back on track. "My point is that these baseless accusations have to have some substance to them. Evidence. Like the evidence we're finding here: not that of someone being framed, but of someone guilty of heinous, awful, dreadful crimes."

"Nick, there's a gun here in the bedroom dressing table that matches the caliber Natalie said was used on Jerry Tate," Tracy said as she entered the room. "Mr. Lucard, do you own a gun?"

"*No.*" Lucard glared murderously at Klaus, who contrived to look thoughtful.

"Who else has access to this suite?" Vetter asked, all business, her former fascination with Lucard dissolving in the face of more complications to the case.

"My valet. My secretary. The maid. The hotel manager. And any *odd* cat burglars who might be hanging around," Lucard said caustically.

"We'll question them, of course," the faux Detective Knight commented, "but are you sure you're not keeping something back, Mr. Lucard? Is there something you're not telling us? Like, oh, say . . . the identity of the person you had that incriminating conversation with last night? And again tonight?"

"What?" Lucard roared, clenching his hands as he started toward Klaus.

"Oh, didn't I mention that? Well, we got an anonymous tip—you have no idea how useful those are—from someone who sent us a tape of you discussing Jerry Tate's death. *Again.* It's very interesting listening—"

"Klaussss—"

"Why do you keep calling me that?" Klaus frowned deeply, since it was the only thing that was keeping him from snickering out loud. "Are you feeling well, Mr. Lucard?"

"Detective Knight, we just pulled up a copy of Mr. Lucard's financial records on the computer? It looks like he transferred a large sum of money to a numbered Cayman Islands bank account. Made a pretty good effort to hide it, too," commented one of the computer cops.

"When I get through with you—" Lucard's voice was a chilly monotone.

"That almost sounds like a threat." Klaus's eyes were slitted, and his lip was curled in what was supposed to be a threatening sneer, but to Lucard it looked like he was two inches from cackling out loud. "Why do you want to see Natalie Lambert dead?"

Dracula's jaw snapped shut to prevent him from leaping for Klaus's throat. "I beg your pardon?" he stalled, confused by the change in the interrogation.

"It's on the tape. You were thinking about killing her." Van Helsing circled Lucard, hands in the pockets of his leather jacket, then leaned in close to whisper too low for the surrounding mortals to hear, "Don't even think about going near her. I was having fun at your expense before this, but now it's serious." He backed away from the other vampire and gloated, "You're going down, Lucard. I think we have enough evidence here to lock you away for a long, long time."

"I want my lawyer." There was no reasoning with Klaus in this mood; Lucard had seen it before. All one could do was wait for Van Helsing to make the inevitable mistake.

"Nick, I really don't think—" Tracy looked more than worried at this new development; she seemed genuinely upset.

"Then you really shouldn't speak," Klaus sniped back, taking a pair of handcuffs out of his pocket. Several of the other officers stared in shock as Tracy silently fumed. "Alexander Lucard, I am charging you with conspiracy to commit murder. You have the right to remain silent. I suggest you use it. If you give up the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law, got it? You have the right to an attorney, though it's not going to do you any good. If you can not afford an attorney—yeah, right!—one will be appointed for you by the Crown. Do you understand these rights as I have read them to you?" As he'd run this speech by Lucard, he'd forced the other vampire's arms behind his back and handcuffed them together. Lucard looked murderous. Tracy gave up hope of talking any sense into her partner until she had the Captain there to back her up.

"You are going to pay for this, 'Detective'," Dracula warned him.

"I'm trembling," Klaus sneered, dragging Lucard out of the hotel suite by his elbow. Tracy trailed after them, her expression troubled, biting her lip and trying to figure out why, aside from circumstantial evidence, Nick seemed so convinced that Lucard was guilty. And if she committed assault and battery against her partner, would justifiable annoyance be a good defense?

When the trio reached the lobby, Klaus frog-marched Lucard past the front desk, giving the high sign to a couple of passing bell-boys and saying, "We got him. There shouldn't be any more trouble. No need to thank us. Just doing our job." Tracy rolled her eyes and followed her partner out to the car. When they got to the Caddy, Van Helsing fumbled with the keys while Vetter tried to apologize to the suspect.

"I'm sure there's a logical explanation for this?" she asked tentatively.

"An extremely illogical one. And it is also unbelievable. So I think I'll wait for my lawyer before I try to tell it." Lucard's expression softened as he looked at Tracy. "But it is most kind of you to still extend the courtesy of reasonable doubt to me."

"Get in the car, you." Klaus took a lot of enjoyment in pushing Lucard's head down so he didn't hit in on the roof of the Caddy. He slammed the back door hard, whirled in a circle, then yanked open his own door in almost one motion. Tracy hurried to get in on the other side of the car, since her partner didn't seem inclined to wait for her.

Nick's favorite radio station, CERK, was on when he turned the ignition key. The Nightcrawler was orating about equal value, or equal payment, or something—Tracy didn't get to hear what, because her partner groaned, "Bor-ring!" and changed the station. James Brown's "I Feel Good" blared into the Caddy as Knight peeled away from the curb, singing along with the radio and grinning like a maniac, Alexander Lucard glowering at him in the rear-view mirror as Tracy Vetter pondered the possible side effects of Prozac on manic-depressive homicide detectives.

Chapter the Eleventh

Not that Lacroix would ever admit it, but his recent consultation with Alexander Lucard had left him worried. Nicholas had occasionally trod too close to the line which separated criminal justice from foolhardy vigilantism in his police work, but his latest actions were just the sort to attract the attention of Enforcers, or the vengeance of Count Dracula. Usually he would have allowed Nicholas to reap the rewards of his stubbornness, but Lacroix's arrangement with Lucard was on the verge of being nullified through his son's ill-considered actions.

So it was with a certain weary impatience that he awaited Nicholas in the latter's dreary little apartment, to have a father-son talk about Not Annoying Father's Friends. They'd had many such talks in the past, covering topics including Nick's filial duties to Lacroix, the proper way a vampire should act, and what was expected of him: they were fairly predictable confrontations. Lacroix would demand. Nicholas would respond with anger and denial of the demands. Lacroix would then use logic and guilt to undermine his son's point of view. Nicholas would begin to whine about becoming mortal and not having to put up with Lacroix anymore. Lacroix would be forced to threaten and cajole. Nicholas would sulk. Lacroix would strategically retreat into a position of calm reason. Nicholas would finally give up, just to make his father leave him alone.

All quite normal, in a dysfunctional-family sort of way.

Imagine Lacroix's surprise, then, when the vampire who next descended through the skylight into Nicholas' apartment proved not to be his son at all, but an impostor wearing similar clothing and acting as if he owned the place.

[A quick digression here, Dear Reader, from the Van Helsing Vampire Files.

As was mentioned before, there is an invisible, tangible connection between vampire children and their creators that exists as long as both of them still live. It is easily detectable, unbreakable, and unmistakable; which is why Lucard and Lacroix are having such an easy time identifying which Nick is which, while the mortals around them are completely fooled. Not that Klaus is that convincing. But if you had no idea there were two Knights around, you'd be unable to realize that one was an impostor.

Another thing you may have been wondering about: how does Alexander Lucard manage to run his business empire, when vampires awaken around sunset and the Stock Exchange closes at 5 p. m.? Suffice it to say that Alexander has cornered (indeed, is hoarding) all the stores of a remarkable Sunblock 2000, which allows him to operate in the open during the daylight hours of overcast Bavarian days. It has the side effect of negating most vampiric powers during the day, but is invaluable to a man in his position.

Klaus, being Klaus, stole his supply from Lucard, so now the two of them are the only vampires on the planet able to walk in the sunshine (so to speak).

We provide these facts simply to satisfy your curiosity on these points; and to explain what happens next.—Editor]

Lacroix is quick on the uptake, and perfectly capable of adding two and two to get a reasonable approximation of four. Knowing that Lucard had a son who greatly resembled his own and was also barking mad *[also, as in addition to, <u>not</u> as in, Nick is barking mad—Ed.]*, the older vampire drew the sensible conclusion from the facts presented. "What have you done with my son?" he snarled, grasping Klaus by the scruff of his neck and slamming him against the far wall.

"You must be Lacroix," Klaus said in a strangled voice. "I've heard so much about you from Alexander—"

"Where. Is. Nicholas!" Lacroix punctuated the demand with a little shake, and was then rather surprised when Klaus brought up both his legs and kicked him in the chest, simultaneously working himself free from the older vampire's grasp and slamming the other into the floor. Klaus and Lucard regularly spar with one another, usually when both are dressed for the opera, and Klaus is unhampered by the filial connection through which Lacroix intimidates Nick into letting him win their confrontations. (Plus, of course, Klaus is a lunatic; and fears for his own survival never deter him from taking risks that can cripple his opponents even as they endanger his own life).

"Your precious Nicholas is perfectly fine. At least, he was the last time I saw him," Klaus commented with a degree of insult, rising up in the air to hover some twelve feet above the sprawled Lacroix. "And I don't appreciate your attitude. You'd think I killed him or maimed him or something—"

Unwilling to concede the psychological advantage of Klaus's hovering over him, Lacroix rose to meet him, hands clenched and eyes gleaming in rage. It was true that he could still detect Nicholas's presence through their bond; but it was weaker than it should have been, now that he troubled to notice it. Meanwhile, Klaus lectured him.

"Nicholas may be restrained for a short while, but I assure you that he will come to absolutely no harm. You should thank me, Lacroix. I'm doing you a favor."

This assertion was ridiculous enough that it stopped Lacroix's advance while he weighed his options: he could torture the information he needed out of the younger vampire; he could simply follow the connection to Nicholas, and try to free him from whatever trap Klaus has set; or he could listen to what Van Helsing had to say, and then follow one of the other two options. "A favor. Now, what would have motivated you to do *me* a favor?"

"I'll admit, it was serendipitous," Van Helsing responded, warily gliding out of reach as he spoke. "I was simply trying to frame Alexander, and temporarily sabotage his KIL Communications bid. But when I saw your son, and realized he

was with the police, the opportunity was too tempting to pass up." Lacroix's nostrils flared as he made a grab for Klaus, which the other eluded by dropping downward and swooping towards the second-floor balcony. "Then, of course, I met Doctor Lambert. Lovely girl. But definitely a danger to us; and we can't trust Alexander where a beautiful woman is concerned, can we?"

"So you're going to kill her for me," Lacroix said, eyes narrowing in suspicion, "because . . . ?"

"Because *I* believe, even if Alexander doesn't, that you'll kill Jerry Tate. He really is a pathetic excuse for a human being, isn't he? I'll be quite happy when he's dead. Meanwhile, I'll have KIL Communications, Alexander will be humiliated, and I'll have Natalie Lambert for dinner." Klaus giggled, avoiding another attempt by Lacroix to corral him by shooting upward, then bouncing off the ceiling. "It's wonderful. But, well, you know your son. Such a stuffed shirt about rules and things. He'd never have framed Lucard as well as I did. And he's going to be very unhappy when he finds out what I'm going to do to Natalie. So I put him in a nice quiet crypt, and there he'll stay until everything's settled." Another clutch at his ankle was circumvented by kicking Lacroix in the jaw, sending the older vampire reeling into the wall. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some arrangements to make for Natalie's demise tonight. I always like to plan these things in advance."

"I have no intention of standing still for this!" Klaus might do what he is planning, or he might not; either way, Lacroix was not about to let this child manipulate him—and he rather resented being kicked into the wall. "I don't trust you and I have no reason to believe you'll keep your word. You *will* tell me where my son is. NOW." He grasped Klaus by the lapels, pushing the other vampire back against the window, both of them snarling and hissing. The Venetian blinds were closed, but Klaus had not yet activated the exterior shutters when Lacroix first attacked him.

Which is why he was able to stretch out his arm, open the blinds, and let in the sunlight that sent Lacroix lurching backward into the shadows, while he fell eight or nine feet to the sunlit floor. Both vampires were panting with exertion now; but Lacroix was the only one sporting a sunburn, since Klaus had applied a coat of Sunblock 2000 before he went to the precinct that evening. Van Helsing was the first to recover himself, and realize that he was completely safe from the older vampire as long as he stayed in the sunlight. *[Well, this is an exaggeration—but take Klaus's ego into account, Dear Reader. Fine gradations of danger are completely beyond him.—Editor. Who apologizes for the interruption.]*

Klaus giggled, struggling to his feet, then brushed off his jacket, while Lacroix clenched his burnt hands and winced in pain, blinking sun-bedazzled eyes. The older vampire glowered in fury at the younger, wishing he'd accepted Lucard's offer of a box of Sunblock as a Halloween present last year, even though he hadn't seen the point at the time. With Klaus snorting in laughter, sticking out his tongue at him and saying, "Nyah-nyah-nyah-nyah, you can't catch me," from the refuge of the sunlight, he was bitterly regretting exchanging it for a copy of Machiavelli's *The Prince*.

"You'll let yourself out, won't you? The elevator does go to the basement. I've got to be leaving if I'm going to make sure Alexander doesn't cause any trouble until after tonight." Van Helsing smirked. "Or, well, I guess you can stay here. Whichever's best for you! It's been a pleasure, Lacroix. And don't think I don't mean that," Klaus confided sincerely. Then, with one last chuckle, he climbed out the window onto the fire escape, and clambered down the stairs.

Chapter the Twelfth

Consider, if you will, the sufferings of a prisoner. Stone walls may not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage—but if you are a vampire, and these are coupled with a sacred cross and some holy water, you can pretty much count on spending the next few millennia exactly where you are. We will ignore, for the moment, the exact progression of deterioration which a creature of the night suffers when denied sustenance. The end result is not pretty, however long it takes.

After forty hours without food, Nick was beginning to wish he'd cheated a bit more on his diet, and had an extra bottle or two of cow before he'd left his apartment. Or possibly a few sips from his secret stash behind the fireplace. As it was, he could feel his grip on the situation at hand beginning to slide as ravening hunger gave way to overwhelming lassitude. Maybe he would just take a nap on top of the sepulcher; okay, it was not the most comfortable of beds, but it was nice and dark in the mausoleum, and he'd already been over and over the details of his capture a thousand times. Screaming for help hadn't gotten him anywhere. Even mentally yelling for Lacroix had availed him nothing. "He's probably laughing at me," Knight complained bitterly aloud to the ceiling, blinking in fuzzy martyrdom at the cobwebs. He'd eaten the spiders twelve hours before, having finally gotten desperate enough to stoop to Renfield-like snack foods. "The smug snake. Prob'ly set this whole thing up . . . just to teach me a lesson."

Of course, that still didn't explain the old guy calling him Klaus. Unless it just seemed like a nice nickname to him; well, you *could* shorten Nicholas to Klaus, instead of Nick, if you were from Germany or somewhere, which the vampire hunter might have been, you never knew, he had an accent . . . Nick yanked his drifting thoughts back on course, nursing his sense of grievance and promising himself the execution of untold punishments, or at least some serious humiliation, for Lacroix, or Van Helsing, or whoever the hell was responsible for this.

We will leave him here for now, Gentle Reader. Self-pity is rarely entertaining, unless you happen to be the one entertaining it—

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—A sentiment which Lacroix would agree with vehemently. Why pity yourself, when you can make someone else the object of universal pity and horror? Such as, say, Klaus. It was unfortunate that he would have to wait until sundown to make the squirrely little slime pay; but in the meantime, Nicholas still had to be found. Tempting as the prospect of allowing Klaus to completely wreck his son's career as a police officer was, Lacroix was unwilling to endure the price of giving Van Helsing the upper hand, or risk the possibility that he would *not* kill Natalie Lambert, and would instead take the unthinkable step of bringing her across. To prevent such an occurrence, the Nightcrawler could grit his formidable teeth and bear the continued ridiculousness of having a child in law enforcement.

Having used Nicholas's phone to telephone for a limo, and appropriated several large, thick coats, a hat, scarf, gloves and sunglasses (not to mention the aforementioned secret fireplace stash—after all, Nicholas might need it) Lacroix played "Hot, Cold" through the streets of Toronto until he located the cemetery where Nick was imprisoned. Cursing fluently in seven languages, he ran to the mausoleum and forced the door open—

Only to reel back from his goal in anger and repulsion.

[More Notes from the Van Helsing Files.

The cross of St. Maretha (not to be confused with the cross of St. Selima, or the cross of St. Marcus, or, well, any other cross you've heard of) was first used in the seventh century by Irish monks intent on driving out lamias laired on the coast of Galway. It is also extremely effective on the lamias' more earth-bound cousins, the vampires. St. Maretha was the patron saint of night people, often praying through the night only to collapse snoring at her pew when sunrise broke. It was thought that her cross repelled other night creatures so well because of her affinity for the nocturnal hours, and the power of her snoring.

The myth about only one pure of heart being able to handle it is actually only pure fiction; but we have to allow the monks some amount of self-advertisement.—Editor]

The Cross of St. Maretha is also quite tacky. The sheer gaudy ugliness of the thing would have driven Lacroix several steps backward without it also being a holy relic.

"Nicholas!" Lacroix crouched in the inadequate shade of the mausoleum, peering through his Ray-Bans into the crypt. "Come out of there at once! I have protective clothing for you here, if you can make it past this damnable cross." His son's silliness about mortality notwithstanding, Lacroix actually had hopes that Nick's recent experiments had granted him a measure of immunity to the bright, garish crucifix.

Alas, it was not to be.

"I can't come out. You did this to me, you get me out."

"Don't be asinine. I had nothing to do with this."

"Well, then why did he call me Klaus?" Nicholas is never logical at the best of times, but his father was made keenly aware that the situation didn't even approach the normal level of illogic when Knight went on. "It's not because he thought I was Santa Claus . . . and he called me his son. He said it was for my own good. I think he thought I was you. No, he thought you were him. Damn. That's not what I wanted to say. I'm sooooo sleepy, Lacroix . . ."

"Nicholas!"

Nick failed to respond, and Lacroix gave up in frustration. Someone else, someone mortal, was going to have to remove the cross. Standing out in bright sunlight arguing with his delusional offspring was only giving him a headache and a sunburn. On the way back to the Raven, the vampire considered his options.

Natalie Lambert was the obvious choice; but the idea of killing her and blaming it on Klaus had been at the forefront of his mind since the giggling maniac left his son's apartment. And Nick would be too guilt-ridden to be bearable company for *decades* if he accidentally drained Dr. Lambert when she released him. No, someone else—someone expendable, since Nick would undoubtedly attack whoever removed the cross and let him out, simply out of desperation and hunger—was going to have to do it.

It was with a certain sense of relief that he decided to place a call to Tracy Vetter as soon as the sun had set.

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Blondes, and boss's daughters, get bad raps about their abilities. Tracy Vetter was—and is—a very bright young lady, with a somewhat grating personality and manner. That she is so often discounted is attributable as much to stereotypes as her own perky, chirpy, happy outlook. But she is far from stupid; and her partner's sudden change in personality, as well as his irrational persecution of Alexander Lucard, worried her and aroused her detective instincts.

And then she saw her partner fly away.

Well, not her partner, obviously. An impostor. Someone *pretending* to be Nick; a *vampire*, for God's sake, had switched places with her poor, irritating depressive of a co-worker, and was now wreaking havoc on both Knight's career and the criminal justice system. It was completely unjust. Horrifyingly awful. But absolutely convincing—it explained everything.

So why was it so hard for Natalie to believe her?

"I swear, Nat, I saw him fly away as soon as our shift was over," Tracy said earnestly. She'd rung Natalie's doorbell only twenty minutes after the coroner reached her home, and Natalie was somewhat perturbed that she had to listen to the younger woman rant on and on. The M.E. had planned on a good eight hours worth of sleep before her date with Nick that night, and she really didn't want to deal with Detective Vetter's revelations. Especially considering it should have been Nick's job to cope with his partner's new knowledge, not hers. She was not in the mood to explain Knight's rationale in "protecting" Tracy by lying to her, since it never made much sense to her in the first place.

"Uh-hunh. Sure you did. Did he sprinkle pixie dust on himself, and think a happy thought, too?"

"That's Peter Pan, Nat. Not vampires."

"How can you tell the difference?" Natalie could have taped her mouth shut after she ironically asked this, because Tracy proceeded to tell her all about Vachon, and vampires,

and how dangerous they were, and why Natalie must not, under any circumstances, keep her date with the Anti-Nick that night.

Dr. Lambert toyed with the idea of telling Tracy the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, right then, but the idea of dealing with the snit-fit Nick would throw later made her restrain herself. She was looking forward to her anticipated date far too much to risk ruining the good mood he'd been in for the last two days. Instead, she opened her eyes very wide and said, "You know, I think you've convinced me. I understand now."

"Really?" Intelligent as she is, Tracy is no wizard at spotting sarcasm.

"Yup. I know you wouldn't lie to me, and you must believe this if you're over here telling me all this stuff. Don't worry about me. I'll just break that date with the Nick-clone as soon as the sun's up. Then you can go arrest him, and make him tell you where the real Nick is." Natalie smiled bravely, calmly; and then added, "Thank you, Tracy. And be careful!"

"Oh, I always am. Now, if only the Captain were going to be so easy to convince," Tracy sighed as she walked out the door.

Chapter the Thirteenth

As the sun sets on the final evening and final fifth of this story, events begin to accelerate with increasing rapidity. For those of you who have lost track, the status of our main characters is as follows:

Alexander Lucard is in custody on suspicion of attempted murder;

Lacroix has found Nick, but is unable to free him;

Both Lacroix and Lucard are aware that Klaus is impersonating Nick;

Tracy knows that someone is impersonating Nick—but she figured it out for all the wrong reasons;

Klaus has managed to alienate Lucard, Lacroix, Nick, Tracy, Captain Reese, and half the Scene-of-Crime team—and charm the heck out of Natalie;

And Natalie, unfortunately, has been charmed and disarmed by Klaus without being even slightly aware he isn't Nick.

It is dusk now, and Tracy is trying to convince Captain Reese that her partner has been replaced by an impostor. She is not having much luck.

"I'm telling you, it all makes sense," Vetter said earnestly, trying for the third time to get the facts across to her bull-headed superior. Some latent sense of self-preservation kept her from bringing vampires into the conversation. She was having enough difficulty getting Reese to buy the idea that Knight's recent manic, irrational behavior was due to his abduction and replacement with an exact double, without dragging the supernatural into it.

"You've been watching too much daytime TV, Tracy. That kind of stuff only happens on soap operas. It's a lot more likely that your partner has finally had that big nervous breakdown we've all been waiting for. I'm calling in a shrink to talk to him tomorrow; until then, work around it! I don't have time for your fairy tales!" And with that, Reese slammed the door to his office shut, closed the blinds, and took the phone off the hook, just in case Tracy took it into her head to call him.

The homicide detective was gloomily studying her recalcitrant phone when a call came in on another line. Sighing, she hit the button for the line and said, "Vetter here."

"Detective Vetter, this is a friend of your partner Nick Knight," a cultured, vaguely familiar voice said. "I think you should know that the man who has been claiming to be Nicholas for the last two days is actually a fraud."

"I know! I just can't get anyone to believe me!" Tracy stopped, scowled, and said, "Who is this? And how did *you* figure it out?"

"Let us say that I believe I know where your partner really is. Unfortunately, I am not in the position to free him—I have certain obligations that keep me from the place—however," and there was a stagy, annoying pause, that nearly had Tracy screaming in frustration, "I understand that the impostor arranged for him to be locked in the Vandeville crypt in King's Cross Cemetery. He's been there almost two days—"

"Ohmigod! He'll be dying of thirst, or suffocating, or starving! I have to go!" Tracy hung up without getting the caller's name, grabbed her gun, her jacket, her badge, and her cellular phone, and ran for the exit. Halfway to the cemetery she got a brilliant idea; and we should be glad she did, since that is what saved her life.

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Klaus had bought out the CN Tower restaurant; what he hoped to have happen that evening didn't exactly include plans for an audience, so except for a few waiters, the maitre 'd, the cooking staff, and the band, the place was deserted. A large amount of money and the discreet application of the "whammy" had ensured total privacy, a wonderful menu, and constant music. The band would wake up the next morning with blisters and sore lips from having played for five hours straight; but it would almost be worth it, since each would find approximately a thousand dollars in cash in their tuxedos.

Speaking of which.

Bad movies have made it impossible to take the idea of a vampire in a tux seriously. There is something bizarre about an overdressed man in an opera cape, fangs bared, eyes glowing, that goes beyond the deserved surprised such a picture conjures. It is far too familiar to be scary. George Hamilton, Leslie Nielson, and Bela Lugosi have a lot to answer for.

Nevertheless, it is Klaus's preferred attire. And he looks good in it; this night, recognizing the importance of the occasion, he had got himself up in his best black-and-white

tux, and the black cape with the scarlet lining. The menu was varied and expensive, as befitted Natalie's final mortal meal, and the playlist was specifically selected by him with romance in mind. Everything would go perfectly.

Except that with Klaus, perfect can occasionally get pretty strange.

"This is . . . breathtaking," Natalie said as she walked into the restaurant. The view was gorgeous, as usual, but the entire rotunda of the CN Tower was also decorated in red roses and glittering silver streamers, in telling contrast to the white ones which decorated the Azure restaurant two years ago. The M.E. could hardly believe this was happening. For something like four years, she and Nick had been keeping each other at arm's length, afraid to get too close; and now, out of the blue, he was treating her to the night of her dreams. Maybe it was jealousy? Or maybe the protein drink? Whatever it was, Natalie had decided she didn't care, as long as Nick kept looking at her like that.

"You look exquisite," Klaus responded, taking her hands and leading her out to the dance floor. "The dress is as beautiful on you as I imagined."

"I shouldn't have let you buy it for me." She smoothed the skirt of the gold-and-red silk dress self-consciously. "But I had to at least try it on, and then when I did—"

"You couldn't resist."

Natalie grinned, warming to Klaus's happy, satisfied smile. "No, I couldn't."

"I sincerely hope that this trend continues. There are many more things that I want you to find irresistible tonight." Van Helsing pulled her close, and gestured to the band. "La Habanera", the tango suite from "Carmen", filled the air, and Klaus suddenly whirled Natalie around in the opening steps of the exotic dance. The M.E. wasn't very confident about her ability to keep up with this new, energized version of her favorite patient, but she decided that there was going to be a lot of fun that evening in trying.

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Tracy grimaced at the stone door of the Vandeville crypt, and shuddered in her jacket upon hearing something that sounded like a wolf howling in the distance. King's Cross Cemetery was dark, forbidding, and cold, and she wouldn't have even been there if she wasn't so worried about Nick. And tonight was the full moon. Great. "Did you hear that?"

"Yeah. It's a dog. Big deal, Trace." Javier Vachon shrugged easily, and eyed the door of the mausoleum. *[It is inexcusable to introduce a pivotal supporting character this late in a story. No real dramatist would allow it. We are, unfortunately, constrained by the facts; so we can only ask, Gentle Reader, that you forgive us the stylistic faux pas.—Editor]*

"I can see why you wanted my help. Not something you could move easily by yourself, even with a crowbar."

"Hey, I think of muscle, I think of you." Vetter punched him affectionately on the shoulder, then helped him brace the lever against the door. "One, two, *three!*" Vachon applied pressure on Tracy's "three", pushing against the crowbar.

The stone door swung open easily, as if someone had recently greased the hinges, and Tracy could see an ornate, baroque cross hung upon a iron gate. "Oh, wow. That looks really old—"

"Mind getting it out of sight, Detective?" Vachon asked, clenching his eyes shut and staggering a bit at the emanations from the cross.

"Ooops. Sorry. I wonder why someone left it here?" The homicide detective had no sooner removed it from its perch on the gate than her question was answered. Nick Knight threw himself at the entrance in desperation, completely dislodging the gate from its place in the doorway, and knocking Tracy to the ground as he did so. The starving vampire crouched outside the mausoleum for a moment, whimpering in pain and hunger, then turned toward the closest available source of protein, his eyes glowing feverishly, fangs extended—

Only to be pulled up short by a hand on the scruff of his neck. "Knight, you have really got to stop being such a dramatic idiot," Vachon said, not unkindly, holding out an opened bottle of the Raven Special. Nick didn't even bother answering, simply took the bottle and inhaled its contents in three gulps. The younger vampire held out another of the bottles which he'd foreseen would be necessary, and the homicide detective managed to get a fairly good grip on it before a furious Tracy found her footing and attacked Vachon.

"You creep! You liar! You rotten, stinking—you knew my partner was a vampire! And you didn't tell me!" Tracy pummeled her supernatural friend with her fists, shrieking at the top of her lungs, then abruptly paused as her eyes widened and she spun to confront Nick.

"You pig! You condescending, smug, arrogant S.O.B.!" She directed a few well-placed kicks at the kneeling Knight, who had the presence of mind to roll out of the way and hide behind a tombstone. "I was actually worried about you, you jerk! I thought you'd be dead or something when I let you out of there! How could you be such a liar! You—" As we mentioned, Tracy is no one's fool. The implications of Vachon's behavior immediately clarified several things about her partner that she'd previously put down to inherent emotional instability. They also made her utterly enraged.

"Uh, Trace," Vachon said tentatively, keeping several feet between himself and the spluttering mortal. "We have bigger problems, remember? Don't you think we ought to clue your partner in, and deal with them first? You can yell at us later. Okay?"

Glaring at Vachon and breathing heavily, Tracy muttered, "Okay. Okay. Yes. Right." She turned to shoot a disgusted look at her partner, who was now on his third bottle of blood and looking buzzed. "But boy, when this is all over, Nick . . . You're gonna be doing *all* of our paperwork for a while, I can tell you that right now . . ."

Chapter the Next-to-Last

That Natalie was having a very good time was not in doubt. Anyone plied with caviar, champagne, filet of sole, and chocolate-covered strawberries is unlikely to complain about their meal; and what was more, in between courses, Nick would lead her out onto the dance floor and hold her close while whispering outrageous compliments. As far as romance went, there was nothing more to be desired. The problem was that she was seriously beginning to doubt her sanity; or at the very least, Nick's.

"I can't believe you hypnotized the entire orchestra. That's just not like you, you're usually so cautious about the vampire stuff—and you know I don't like it, usually . . . Why did you go out on this kind of limb tonight?"

"Because now I am certain we will spend eternity together," Klaus responded meaningfully, letting his hands roam across her back perhaps more than was called for. "And I felt the significance of the occasion justified for it."

Natalie's heart began to beat wildly, distracting Klaus from her next question. "Significance? What significance would that be?"

"Hmmmmmm?"

"Nick, c'mon, keep your hands around my waist. I'm serious. Is there some bit of information that you wanted to share with me?"

"Only that I will never leave you," Klaus promised fervently, "and you are the only woman I've ever loved." Which declaration inspired a long, impassioned, intricate kiss that would have completely undermined the resolve and concentration of a lesser woman; but Dr. Lambert is made of sterner stuff than those who don't use Eau de Formaldehyde as their usual cologne.

"The only one you've ever loved, hunh?"

"I swear it," the vampire avowed, nibbling at her fingertips, barely restraining himself from actually breaking the skin.

"What about . . . Marion Blackwing?"

"Who?" Van Helsing attempted to look completely infatuated, instead of infatuated and confused. Why was Natalie giving him such a hard time?

"The faith healer, remember? And how about—Denise Ford? The psychic?"

"I don't remember her."

"That's funny, considering she died in your arms."

"Well, lots of women have done that." Klaus winced when Natalie punched him, then added, "Besides, I never loved her like I love you." How many women *had* Knight been involved with?!? "Let's dance. Maestro! Our song!"

The orchestra went into an upbeat version of Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing", and Klaus swept Natalie into a pas de deux resembling the Lambada, only not as refined. It was almost enough to allay Natalie's fears; but somehow, some way, she felt there was something missing. Nick was just too . . . too . . . nonchalant. Usually, he'd have been wallowing in the guilt of his murdered innocents by now; instead, he was demonstrating that he could care less about them. For Nick Knight, Guilt King of the Prom, to so lightly set aside his reservations and fears, there had to be a good reason.

Or, maybe it was just a side effect of the drink.

As she observed Nick go into John Travolta's moves from *Saturday Night Fever*, swiveling his hips and pointing at the ceiling, the coroner decided to try getting through to the old Nick one last time. Just to be sure he was okay.

Letting him twirl her until she was dizzy, and then dip her nearly to the floor, Natalie asked, "Okay, I believe you. I'm the only woman you've ever loved. But even ignoring Emily Weiss, Allyce Hunter, and all those other women you're always telling me about, I still don't think you can just dismiss Janette that easily."

"Why not?" Klaus asked, pulling her back up to stand next to him. "It's not like we were married, or anything. Besides, I didn't know her for that long. She meant nothing to me."

Oops!

Natalie stepped backward, staring at him in shock. "Nick, you've known her eight hundred years. Your entire life. What are you talking about, you didn't know her that long?"

"Oh, *that* Janette. I thought you meant the other one—" Klaus smiled desperately, his face lit up in little-boy chagrin. "Well, you know. Easy come, easy go—"

"Who are you?" The M.E. said, brushing aside his attempts to cover his mistake. "You're not Nick." Her eyes narrowed in anger and suspicion. "I should have known you weren't him! Nick hates opera cloaks! He'd never have worn one on this date! What have you done with him?!?"

❑❑❑❑❑

By this time, Tracy and Vachon had been able to fill Nick in on the impostor's activities, beginning with arresting Lucard and ending with his proposed date with Natalie. Nick was having a little trouble following the explanation, possibly because he was on his fourth bottle of blood after a long period of abstinence, and he was now in that state characterized as "feeling no pain"; possibly because his partner was talking nineteen to the dozen, waving her arms around and letting her voice get squeaky with intensity. "But it's okay about Nat, because I told her you weren't you, that the guy was a vampire, and she agreed to break the date—"

"My evil twin is a vampire?!" Nick choked on his drink, frothing a little at the mouth as the horrifying implications set in. "But Natalie knows *I'm* a vampire. She'll have thought that I was me, I mean he was I, and that you were just confused—where was he going to take her? Tell me!"

"Uhhh, the CN Tower—" Tracy's partner whooooooooshed into the sky, weaving a little bit it's true, but still rocketing off too fast for the eye to follow. "Whoa. I guess

Nat's in trouble. C'mon, Vachon, we have to go help save her!"

"We? Whaddaya mean, *we*?" Vachon looked at Tracy cockeyed. "You know, I never get in trouble except when I'm hanging out with you—"

"Let it go, Vachon. You follow Nick, I'll drive—"

"There *is* a faster way." The younger vampire grabbed Tracy in a close embrace, and she would have enjoyed it a lot, that is, if the ground hadn't gone away just then.

"Mooooommmmeeeeeeeee—"

❑❑❑❑❑

Klaus was still trying to lie his way out of his mistake, but Natalie wasn't having any. "Just tell me what you did with him. And who *are* you, anyway? Why did you do this? Did Lacroix put you up to this?"

"Hardly," Klaus said, insulted, then grimaced as he realized he'd admitted to her accusations. "Damn." Considering the furious coroner's lovely face, he shrugged and decided to go for broke. "I did all this because I *am* in love with you, my darling. I had to be alone with you, to convince you of my regard—"

"Save it." Natalie turned and began to stalk toward the exit. "One lying vampire in my life is enough—" With vampiric speed, Klaus was suddenly kneeling in front of her, his hands clasped in supplication.

"Then if there can be only one, why can't it be *me*? Oh, please, oh please, oh please, Nat, I have so many plans for us! The dreams! The riches! The eternity of darkness!"

"*What?* Are you crazy, Nick? I mean—oh, get off the floor, you look ridiculous. Look, what's your name?" Natalie was finding it more and more difficult to stay angry with her suitor; he was just as cute as Nick, twice as considerate, and wasn't afraid to make a fool of himself to get her attention. But she wasn't about to let on that he was getting to her.

"Klaus van Helsing, at your service, m'lady. Prince of the Night, Vampire Extraordinaire, financier of note—" Van Helsing was flourishing his cape around, smiling winningly, and looking dashing until he was interrupted.

"—and an incredible bore, too, Dr. Lambert." The civilized voice which cut in on Klaus's self-aggrandizement was amused and weary at the same time. Klaus interposed himself between Natalie and the newcomer, but not before the M.E. spotted Alexander Lucard standing on the balustrade of the balcony, clad in a tuxedo that exactly matched Van Helsing's.

"I'll protect you, my love!"

"Oh, do shut up, Klaus. Dr. Lambert is far too sensible to believe anything you say." Lucard lazily dropped down from his perch and strolled across the ballroom until he was only a few feet away from the couple. "I trust you're well, Doctor?"

"Peachy." Natalie's lips were pressed together in a thin line of annoyance. "You know this guy, Mr. Lucard?"

"May I introduce my son, Klaus. I see that you've already perceived that he is not your good friend Detective Knight; but the resemblance is uncanny, isn't it?" Lucard stared coldly at his child, his eyes lit with satisfaction and rage. "He has been at some pains to embarrass me here in Toronto, and he couldn't overlook the opportunity to use the chance likeness. I apologize for his behavior toward you, however; his audacity is inexcusable—"

"Don't listen to him! He's come here to kill you!" Klaus yelled, still blocking most of Natalie's view of the other vampire, his arms outstretched as if preparing to take a bullet for her. "He and Lacroix arranged it between the two of them; Lacroix was supposed to kill Jerry Tate, and Lucard is going to kill you!" So saying, he snarled at his master, then dissolved into self-congratulatory giggles of hysteria.

Natalie rolled her eyes and hit him on the side of the head, which helped Klaus regain his feeble self-control. The mortal sighed and turned back to Lucard. "Is any of that true?"

"I could deny it, but I wouldn't want to insult your intelligence."

"No, of course not. Why should you insult me, when you're going to kill me in two minutes?"

"I didn't say that," Lucard responded, his eyes assessing her as he smiled coolly. "It's true, Lacroix and I did discuss a trade of—services, shall we say? But unfortunately, he failed to live up to his end of the bargain, and now Jerry Tate is quite dead without his assistance."

"You killed him!" Klaus shrieked, then clutched Natalie's shoulders and whispered, "You see? You're not safe here! You have to let me bring you across, before he tries to kill you!"

Lucard and Natalie traded disbelieving glances, then the coroner tactfully said, "That's terribly sweet of you, Klaus, but I don't think it's a really good idea—"

"I think it's a *horrible* idea," said the Nightcrawler, alighting on the balcony in time to overhear the discussion. "And this isn't at all what I was hoping to find when I arrived. Why isn't she dead yet?" he asked Lucard, striding forward angrily, his dark trenchcoat and turtleneck an odd contrast to the evening wear of the other vampires. "I go to all the trouble of arranging for Tate's ex-lover's escape from a mental hospital, ensuring that she would kill her former cockroach of a bedmate, and you, Lucard, have the temerity to consider reneging on our agreement?" Lacroix's nostrils flared, his eyebrows rose, and the eyes below the scary eyebrows began to glow. "I thought you were a man of honor."

"Don't question my integrity, Lacroix. Coming from you, that accusation in laughable," Dracula responded with a snarl. "Do you expect me to believe that the fortunate happenstance that allowed Tate's lover to escape—and thus incidentally clear me of suspicion—was all *your* doing? Please. How stupid do you think I am?"

"Much stupider than I previously imagined, obviously—stop right there, Van Helsing!" While Lacroix and Lucard were busy arguing, Klaus was trying to drag Natalie behind the potted palms, his hand over her mouth, telling her that she'd like being a vampire, really she would. Natalie bit his hand when Lacroix boomed out his command to stop, and Klaus let go of her long enough for her to get free and head back toward the dance floor.

"All of you. Just STAY AWAY FROM ME. I have *had* it! Go bother someone else!"

A crash of glass, and Nick Knight dropped down in front

of Natalie, facing the trio of vampires who were threatening her. He was still quite punchy from his recent blood binge, and taking on three other vampires seemed like a good idea. "It's all right, Nat. I'm here, no one's going to hurt you—"

"Oh, that's very reassuring," Natalie snapped. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Some old Austrian guy locked me in a crypt—YOU!" Nick had spotted Klaus, and the immediate jealousy/territorial/male stupidity hormone kicked into overdrive. "This is all your fault! You stay away from my Natalie!"

"Gee, Nick, I didn't know you cared." This snippy remark was completely overlooked in the ensuing scuffle between Nick and Klaus, which involved both of them rolling, kicking, biting, throwing, flying, punching and screaming abuse at each other. Natalie stood on the sidelines, amazed at how little she felt like a woman in a romance novel and how much she felt like a pre-school teacher on a playground.

During the fight, Vachon and Tracy landed on the balcony and took in the situation. Vachon was uneasy, to say the least; as vampires go, he is relatively low-key and non-aggressive, and the number of heavy hitters and known psychopaths in the room was making him nervous. "Trace, this was a very bad idea—"

"Mr. Lucard?" Tracy asked weakly, stumbling forward in shock. Air-sickness combined with surprise to reproduce a sensation closely akin to nausea. She glanced sideways, and spotted Lacroix glaring and glowing-eyed on the other side of the room, cheering Nick on, and waiting to get in his shot at Klaus. Her partner was recreating the WWF Championships in the middle of the ballroom with his exact double, Natalie was fuming angrily, and here was the billionaire she'd been fantasizing about in a tuxedo and opera cloak, obviously not a disinterested onlooker. Vetter gulped and tugged on the M.E.'s sleeve. "Hi. We're here to rescue you."

"Fabulous." Natalie looked back in the direction Tracy came from, and waved to Vachon. "I was just getting ready to leave."

"Nooo!" Klaus disentangled himself from Nick long enough to slide across the floor to the coroner, clutching her around the knees. "Don't go! I'm sorry! I'll never lie to you again, really! I swear!"

"Klaus, stop trying to look up her dress," Lucard said, yanking Van Helsing away from the coroner.

"Will someone please kill the mortal? Is that so much to ask?" Lacroix said wearily, then added, "Or do I have to do it myself?"

"If you lay a finger on her—"

"I'll hunt you down, Lacroix—" Both Nick and Klaus were advancing on the Nightcrawler, who groaned in agonized surrender. Keeping his plans a secret from Nicholas was now impossible, and his frustration level had risen to the point where he honestly didn't care. Let Nick hate him. Anything, so long as he didn't have to stick around.

"Enough! I don't care what else you do, kill each other, kill Lucard, kill yourselves; I am leaving, and I want Natalie Lambert dead by sunrise! Lucard, I expect you to keep your word. Or I'll know the reason why!" So saying, Lacroix took off in a huff, unable to endure another moment of twin Nicholases fighting over the despicable mortal.

"I thought he'd never leave. Natalie—" Klaus was back to pleading words and longing glances.

"Get away from her, you. Nat—" Nick stepped forward, his arms out to hold her.

"BOTH OF YOU. BE! QUIET! NOW!" An awe-struck silence filled the ballroom at Dr. Lambert's enraged shout. It was broken by the orchestra starting up a jazzy "Someone To Watch Over Me."

"THAT GOES FOR YOU GUYS, TOO!" The band fell silent, influenced as much by fear of Natalie as by Klaus's lingering "whammy". "Thank you. You—" Natalie pointed at Klaus— "are a lying, scummy, no-good, blood-sucking fraud. I never want to see you again. But I'll settle for your absence for the rest of the night."

"B-b-but—"

"Jump off this balcony. I mean it. Jump, Klaus, or you can forget about taking me to the midnight showing of that Boris Karloff festival. *Forever.*"

"Nat!"

"Jump!"

"I'd do it, man," Vachon whispered to Klaus. "She's *peeved.* Send her flowers later."

"You think?"

"Definitely."

Klaus sighed, looked pitifully at Natalie, blew a raspberry at Nick, and said, "Next time, Dracula. And there *will* be a next time," and jumped off the edge of the CN Tower. Natalie crossed to the balustrade to make sure he wasn't hanging around, and nodded in satisfaction when she saw his form retreating into the horizon.

"Good. One down. Nick?"

"Yes, Nat?"

"You're an unromantic slob. I had more fun tonight with Klaus than I've had with you in the last year."

"You don't mean that—"

"Oh, don't I just?" The M.E.'s patience was clearly exhausted. "Tell me something. Why haven't you taken me out to dinner lately? Dancing? A lousy movie, for godssake? Hunh? Why?"

Nick struggled to understand why Natalie was so upset; but the beating he'd taken from Klaus wasn't helping him think any more clearly through his blood buzz, and his incredible angst emerged to hamper him once more. "You know how I feel about you—"

"Answer the question, smart guy."

"It isn't safe."

"Try again. Nothing's safe, I think this evening demonstrates that."

"I was going to wait until I was mortal to ask you out."

"Oh, and if that never happens?"

"Welll—"

"Ha! You know what, Nick? You can take a flying leap off that balcony, too. In fact," Natalie picked up a broken table leg left over from Knight's fight with Van Helsing, lit it off the candles, and smiled grimly. "I think you'd better start running. Now."

"You're upset—"

"Brilliant observation. I can see why they made you a

detective. If you're not out of my sight in the next five seconds, I'm going to show you the meaning of 'upset.' Not to mention give you a whole new appreciation of the phrase, 'flaming pain.' *One*."

"Natalie—"

"*Two*." She started toward him, her eyes glowing maniacally, makeshift torch at the ready.

"Can't we talk about this?"

"*Three*."

Nick ducked a feint at his head and grabbed for the torch, but in his weakened and inebriated state miscalculated and ignited his sleeve.

"FOUR," Natalie yelled.

"Yeeee-OWWW!" he grabbed for the ice water, doused himself, then desperately said, "Nat, please. I can't leave you here with *him*." Nick pointed unsteadily at Lucard, who was watching the proceedings with a highly entertained expression.

"I've got Vachon and Tracy to protect me. Not to mention my handy-dandy torch. And frankly, I don't think you'd be much help. *Five!*" She lunged at Nick, who tripped, stumbled, and smacked into the balustrade. Seeing Natalie bending over him with her stake/torch descending toward his chest, Nick's survival instincts sent him hurtling over the railing, down toward the street below. A small SMACK! could be heard from the balcony.

"Well. That takes care of him." The coroner sighed, then turned to Vachon and Tracy. "You guys can split now."

"Natalie! He'll kill you!" Tracy protested, at the same time that Vachon breathed a sigh of relief. "We can't leave you here!"

"Here, home, wherever—Tracy, if it's gonna happen, it's gonna happen." Natalie smiled wearily. "And no offense, Vachon, but am I wrong in guessing that Count Dracula here can take you three falls out of five?"

"Nope. Thanks, Doc. Trace, we're outta here." The homicide detective had no time to protest before she was airborne and screaming for her mother again.

Which leaves us with Natalie Lambert and Count Dracula. And, of course, the orchestra.

"You do understand that I have to kill you?"

"Do you?" A slight pause. "Are you really sure about that?"

Chapter the Last

Happy endings are in the mind of the beholder.

Certainly there is no happy ending for Jerry Tate, late host of *The Jerry Show*. Being electrocuted in one's bathtub is not a particularly dignified way to go, but it also lacks the spicy notoriety that Jerry aspired to. So wherever he is in the afterlife, it is likely that he still has lingering regrets on how he left this plane of existence.

And this story does not have a truly happy ending for Captain Reese, either. Not only did his people upset an important financier and fail to prevent Jerry Tate's death, but it is now apparent that there *is* a double for Nick Knight running around; and after the night that Natalie, Alexander Lucard, Nick, Tracy and Vachon convinced him of this, he was never quite able to relax around his star detective again. All Nick had to do was whistle, or hum, and Captain Reese would start to shiver, and then leave the room in search of a drink of water.

Charly, it can be said, is quite happy. She is still drugged to the gills in the Toronto Asylum for the Criminally Insane; she is getting quite skilled at fingerpainting; and the nurses let her listen to the Nightcrawler on CERK as much as she wants.

Gustav van Helsing is actually quite cheerful these days. Having made the acquaintance of a lovely girl in Toronto who seems to be able to keep his son in line, and who is also interested in curing him, Gustav finds that he is able to relax more often, and enjoy his golden years more fully than when he was obsessed with vampire hunting. Of course, he still takes the random opportunity to irritate Lucard; but an old man should be allowed his pleasures without censure from others.

Klaus? Well, Klaus's style of mood management makes it impossible to say with any assurance when he is happy and when he is merely hyper; but Natalie *does* make it a point to date him at least once a week. His infatuation with the coroner does not seem to have been abated by her transformation into a vampire. In fact, it is quite possible that it has intensified his obsession—since he now has adopted the pastime of tormenting Nick Knight as often as he torments Alexander Lucard. That Natalie occasionally scolds him for this does not seem to deter him from his fun.

Nick is miserable. At least, as of this writing, he still says he is miserable; guilty, angry, unhappy that Natalie asked Dracula to bring her across, feeling both responsible for the occurrence and betrayed by Dr. Lambert. That she is still pursuing a cure for vampirism, and that she persuaded Lucard to give him a box of Sunscreen 2000 for his birthday, has in no way mitigated his claim to wretchedness. However, it has been noted that on the Friday nights on which Natalie deigns to join him after work at his apartment, he displays a recognizable lift in his spirits prior to the evening's start, a (how do we put this delicately?) palpable sense of anticipation. Whether or not he ever comes to terms with his personal demons, it is clear that the prospect of having Natalie around, under whatever terms she dictates, is not all bad.

Alexander Lucard is well-pleased with his newest daughter. He is also happy to have obtained KIL Communications for a song; the scandal around Tate's death and his own arrest gave him a decided amount of leverage at the bargaining table, which he was able to exploit quite profitably. Natalie has consented to do contractual biochemistry work for Lucard Industries; and when he is in the city, he always remembers to call on her and take her somewhere exotic and romantic for dinner. Nick and Klaus are no longer allowed in several fine nightclubs in Toronto due to their predictable reactions to this semi-regular event. Whether Dracula has any deeper interest in Dr. Lambert, deeper than that of filial devotion or biochemistry, is probably not a safe

topic for speculation.

Tracy and Vachon are by turns happy, sad, mad, exhilarated, and depressed; but such is the case for many couples in the first stages of their relationship. Their story is not over, but is merely beginning, so speaking of happy endings in connection with the pair is a bit premature on our part. It can be said that Tracy now gets along much better with her partner than she did previously; and that Knight's continued writing of Vetter's reports has left her more free time for other pursuits.

And Natalie?

It is a Saturday night in Toronto, and our favorite M.E. is simultaneously checking her Daytimer (the better to juggle her obligations to Klaus, Nick, and Alexander), petting Sidney, talking to Tracy, and ordering pizza. She insists on keeping her Saturdays to herself, as time to recuperate from the dizzy social whirl her life has acquired since that night at the CN Tower. Usually she paints her nails, talks with friends on the phone, catches up on her e-mail, and listens to music; and when the spirit moves her, she extracts her own version of Klaus-inspired revenge on those who have made her life difficult.

"That's right. Fifteen deep-dish pizzas, extra sauce, extra cheese, pepperoni, olives, sardines, and extra extra garlic, to be delivered to the Raven. No, I'm charging it to my Visa. Thirty minutes? Wonderful. Thank you so much." Natalie grins at Tracy as she hangs up the phone, and the blonde homicide detective sips her Margarita and shakes her head mock-disapprovingly at her vampiric friend's antics. "Hey, I'm sure someone there will appreciate them." The M.E. crosses the room to turn up the volume on the radio. CERK comes in loud and clear.

"And sometimes, Gentle Listeners, you may ask yourself—what did I do to deserve this? Really? How can there be a God, if I am tortured so unceasingly by mine enemies? Is there no justice?" The voice on the radio is agonized, enraged, humbled; music to Natalie's ears. *"All you have ever done, you say, is behave according to your nature. But does anyone take that into account? Is there any pity?"*

A dramatic pause, that has both Tracy and Natalie saying "C'mon, c'mon, spit it out, you big windbag!"

"NOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!! There is no mercy! No remorse! No quarter! Our lives are merely unceasing repetitions of humiliation and PAIN!"

And at that anguished howl in the night, Natalie smiles and turns off the radio, the better to dish about men with Detective Vetter.

We trust that Lacroix's mental state can be deduced from the above paragraphs. Any other commentary would verge on the cruel.

So it is with a sense of adequate dramatic closure that we leave our friends in Toronto, and bid a fond adieu to the creatures of the night. It is not impossible that we shall meet again; but this is as good a stopping point as any, and if this tale raises as many questions as it answers, then we have done our duty in the interests of scholarly research.

Sincerely,
Christina Kamnikar,
Gustav van Helsing,
Aristotle, and Urs
Editors of *The Van Helsing Vampire Files*
North American and European Districts
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End Notes:

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The Editors of this document may be contacted through Christina Kamnikar <vqrw76a@prodigy.com>.

A Stitch In Time

by Apache

OK, it's spring, and a young girl's fancy turns to . . . the vampire she's been hanging around with for the last several months.

It was one of those times that Vachon was over at my place. He'd run through his little ritual of investigating something in my apartment. Tonight it was the game files on my computer—actually, it is truly awesome to watch someone do the huge grid of Minesweeper in three seconds flat. But now we were just hanging around listening to music. It was my night off, and every night is his night off, and the whole thing just felt pleasantly languid.

I had a bright idea. An impulse, a desire. Call it what you like. A delusion, maybe. Anyway, I hopped up and said, "Wait a minute . . . don't move, OK?" and trotted back to my bedroom.

My hair is ultrafine and won't hold a snarl any more than it will hold a perm, but I do have a hairbrush as well as a comb. A good one, boar bristles. I picked it up and bounced back into the living room, full of my happy impulse.

He flinched when the brush first touched his head. You have to figure a fair amount of trust was involved in him just letting me come up behind him and touch him at all, since touching is not something we do. That I do. The rule seems to be, he gets to touch me, my hair, with little strokes, and everything else is hands off.

"Lean forward a little, OK?" I swear, I truly thought this was harmless. Between the motorcycle and flying, his hair is always so wild . . . Oh, hindsight.

The brush couldn't do much at first against a tangled thatch like that, but I'd made up my mind . . . After a minute, I could pull it through one section of his hair, and I just kept going. Long, incredibly thick, heavy black hair, and now I'd given myself an excuse to stick my fingers in it, pick apart tangles the brush tightened, smooth it down when I'd gotten a section clear.

And who doesn't love to have their hair brushed? The nice scratch across the scalp, the gentle pull on the muscles of the neck . . . It's a caress, but not too personal, not so intimate that you're crossing a line you can't ever go back from.

He went through stages—nervously stiff at first, relaxing, and finally complete pleasure—and I got to have that black silk in my hands and play with it, and make it even more beautiful, even softer.

When I was close to done, I started brushing it flat against his back, so the brush was running lightly across his shirt, down his shoulders, just a little scrape down the ends of the longest hair and teasingly just past them onto his back.

I meant to stop then, but after I'd let a few seconds go by without doing something new with his hair, he rocked forward on the sofa, tucked a knee under himself to get some height, and peeled his shirt off in one quick fluid motion. All without looking around at me, without a word.

And I was looking at the length of his back, pale and muscular, almost without blemish, the thin, strong body that had been frozen in the middle of a soldier's youth centuries ago. He bowed his head slightly, pulling the raw ends of the dark hair high onto the white shoulders, still not looking around, not moving at all once he'd presented me with this new situation.

I snorted softly, thinking, yeah, scratch your back and you'll scratch mine? But the wisecrack would have ruined the moment, spoiled whatever it was he was offering me. And I really, really wanted to know where this could go.

I stroked his back with the brush so lightly he could barely have felt it, but it was clear from the little shudder that went through him that he had. So I scratched a little harder with the brush, following the lines of muscles, tracing the ribs outward from the spine, dipping into the grooves where the shoulder blades end, the place where my Dad told me the wings would grow when I got to be an angel. And I was stroking the back of a demon . . . unh-uh. I was doing something, I didn't really know what, with Vachon.

He shivered again as I began to reach around his sides with the brushstrokes, following the ribcage around toward the front—ticklish? I wanted to ask, to tease, but this mood, this place we were in together, was as soft and delicate as eiderdown, and more fragile than smoke. Let it alone . . . and I ran the brush down his arms, over the short black hairs on his forearms, making a little silent joke of brushing them into a wave pattern. And then there was nothing more to do, no other part of him to brush, unless I was going to push it, reach around him and run the bristles down his chest, into the line of black hair that runs down his belly toward his groin . . . So I stopped. No pushing this time. Whatever's going to happen next, let him do it.

And the two of us stood there like sculptures, not speaking, him kneeling on the sofa, me standing behind it, lined up one in front of the other like dominoes or chessmen, for a long moment. Then his head came up and he twisted around, still propped up on one knee, to face me.

His eyes were pure curiosity. Just soft and full of wonder. He was as far into unknown territory as me— more, maybe. Push it or stop now? What's possible? What do I want? And you? His eyes are so dark I saw myself in them, a fairly ordinary blonde girl standing in her living room holding a hairbrush. He reached for me, only landing his fingertips on my arms and curling them to pull me closer, all without any expression but that powerful curiosity, not even any desire.

And me, what was I showing him? Fear and longing, probably. Confusion tied to a curiosity that's like his, but easier to have, because I'm the normal one who lives in the regular world and is safe there. I'm the one with a home and a family and a job and a life, with an identity that isn't just some faked passport and a glib line of chatter. And I was thinking of what he told me, no birds/no bees/no mortals, and feeling like we might just slip through the cracks unnoticed in a moment as suspended as this . . .

A kiss. Gentle, but like the pull of his fingers, it just kept increasing until we were pressed against each other hard, kissing each other hard, hungrily, all the pent-up desire flooding out into one single kiss, so full of need, a kiss that somehow was made entirely of taking for both of us—

His arms spasmed around me. He lifted me over the back of the couch, slamming me down, and his body landed on me like a slab of rock. By the time my head hit the pillow, Vachon had clamped his teeth into my shoulder like a bulldog, ripping into the flesh right through the blouse, then holding. I tried to react, but I couldn't move at all, couldn't squirm, couldn't flail an arm. He had one hand slapped over my mouth to stop the scream that formed—an expert move, thumb holding the jaw all but closed so the throat couldn't open, a finger curled inside the mouth, immobilizing the tongue.

And then nothing happened. The pain was horrible, the fire and pull of his bite into my body, and there was a single initial convulsion of his body—I felt him suck, felt him swallow—and then nothing more. I couldn't move, and he didn't move. There'd been a moment of that purring snarl I heard when he killed Vudu, and now nothing.

Nothing. He was rigid, silent, and I only knew he was still conscious by his instant and absolute response to my efforts to squirm. I tried gnawing on the finger in my mouth, but it instantly and painfully pressed against the roof of my mouth to force my jaws apart. One finger, that strong. And nothing else moved. Most of all, there was no lessening of the terrible grip on my shoulder. No more sucking, but no letting go. Then, as time went on, the first wave of terror wore off and I realized what had happened, what was still happening.

More stillness. And then he made another animal noise, something like a polar bear's chuff from way deep in his gut. He let go, got up, grabbed his shirt, pulled it on, and moved into a corner like I was going to attack him, all very fast. And then he just stood there, arms crossed, eyes blank—yellow and weird— practically catatonic.

Attack him? I could barely move, but I had to do something about my shoulder. I also had to take care of him, if it was possible. We were stupid, and we'd made the same mistake a second time. And, scared though I was, I was also pretty sure he'd just saved my life again. *And he's staying . . .*

"Vachon, thanks."

They were the first words between us since I'd touched the brush to his head. They didn't come out much louder than a whisper, but they didn't need to. Then I hauled myself up to go look in the bathroom mirror to find out how bad it was.

Not too terrible, which is to say he hadn't actually pulled out a hunk of flesh. I peeled off my blouse, which aside from being torn had stains where he'd sucked blood through. In the front, all I could see was a fairly light imprint of ordinary tooth marks, but using a hand mirror I saw the fang marks on my back. They were kind of triangular, deep punctures, still oozing blood.

I lost it for a moment then, freaked and closed my eyes and leaned forward against the mirror over the sink, trying hard not to scream, not to frighten the wild animal in my living room—and not to cause any more pain to the man who was in there with it. I stuffed a towel in my mouth and cried for a minute as quietly as I could, and then reason came back and started telling me what to do.

Don't think you can go to the ER with this one, Trace.

OK, no, but clean it up and slap a bandage on it. Basic first aid for bites, no matter what bit you. Or who—I ducked my head backward to look through the bathroom doorway at Vachon, and said "do I need a tetanus shot?"—jokingly. No response. Still life of a man with yellow eyes and black hair staring at a carpet. A man gone way deep inside himself, back wedged into a corner. *But he hasn't run away. He's still right here.*

I have iodine and alcohol and all kinds of good, painful stuff in the medicine cabinet, so I pulled it out, gripped the bottles against my side and twisted the caps off, and poured some on. It was awkward, though, and I ducked my head back into the open doorway again. "Think you could lend me a hand?" Nothing. I went back to what I was doing, trying to apply a gauze bandage to my own back one-handed.

Twenty seconds or more later, I heard him say "No."

"Huh?" Darting out to the doorway.

"No," he repeated. Very quietly, without inflection, but coming back to himself.

He looked up, still yellow-eyed. "I can't get near you," he said. There was strain in his voice.

"Oh, okay, fine. I'm doing fine," I said hastily. He was staying, that was the main thing . . . I poured some more iodine over the slope of my shoulder, yelped as some of it actually reached the bite marks, and threw a towel over it, scuttling off to my bedroom for a sweatshirt I wouldn't mind staining.

And he was still there . . . I went back to the sofa and sat down. I was so far in shock, I think, that I was behaving normally. The bells weren't starting to ring in my head yet, the moment hadn't come when I'd seriously lose it and flip out and bounce off the walls. *You first, Vachon,* I thought. *'Cause you're still here.*

"Is this too close?" He was about eight feet away, I figured. Arms wrapped around himself like some-thing would fall out if he was jostled.

No answer. I noticed I was sitting next to the pillow with my blood on it, still very red and fresh. *That's not helping,* I thought, and turned it over. No, on second thought . . . I lobbed it into the bathroom, hoping out of sight was out of mind.

"We need to talk," I said. TV dialogue—but what do you say?

The yellow eyes blinked, but the voice was famil-iar. Soft spoken. "It's pretty simple. I just bit you."

"Do I taste good?" *What are you saying, Trace?*

But it was the right thing. So unexpected it shocked him out of his stillness. The yellow faded into brown-black, and he was looking at me with the same affectless curiosity we started

with. Then his eyes crinkled a little. "Wonderful," he said, very softly.

"Good." This made me grin; everyone likes a compliment—even a demented vampire one. "Come sit down." He didn't move, so I went and got him. He shivered when I touched him, tried to shrink a little further into the corner, but his eyes stayed dark and human, which was more than I hoped for. "C'mon, Vachon," I said, and pulled at his arm. He let me do it, push him down on the sofa and sit a foot or so away, but he wouldn't meet my eyes.

"It's pretty simple," I said, mimicking his tone. "We want to have something here. We have to figure out how before something terrible happens."

"You're talking about your death," he said. His gaze flickered to mine for a split second, then went back to the floor. "That's all that can happen, unless you come across."

"I don't believe it," I said. "You're not gonna kill me. You keep inventing new ways not to kill me, no matter how hard I try . . ." Now his eyes were fixed on me, curious, but harder-looking than before. I gave him look for look. "Trust me on this, Vachon. You just won't do it."

"Trust you." The irony was back.

"Yeah," I said. I felt crazy and cocky, sure of myself. Sure I was right about him. "Vachon—" and then my nerve failed.

We let a long minute go by in silence, but it wasn't awful.

"I've been told it's possible," he said finally, very quietly, not his humorous self at all. His eyebrows went up at my seeming incomprehension.

"Exactly what you're thinking, Tracy," he said. "Sex. Fucking. Lovemaking. Without coming across." He sighed. I must have made some kind of sound, because two or three expressions crossed his face that said don't turn coy now. And you were never stupid. And other things I didn't understand. I nodded.

"Or we could just never see each other again," I said. Now my eyes were glued to the carpet. A long minute passed.

"You said 'thanks,'" he said softly.

I looked up, surprised, and found him looking at me with one of those small smiles that come out when he's happy about something, enjoying something.

"Well, I would have screamed, but you didn't let me."

Another smile. "Tracy . . ." It trailed off. He was looking at me from a pretty far distance.

"It may be inevitable," I said. I gave him a smile that turned into one of those twisted, rueful expressions. "Why don't we try to make a plan before somebody gets hurt?" *Me, actually.*

"Bad idea, Trace," he said, smiling slightly. "It really is."

But then he slid down the sofa and pulled me toward him, ignoring my "ouch," and stroking my hair. He sighed, and spoke very softly into the air over my head. "On the other hand, bad ideas are kind of a specialty with me."

I twisted my head and leaned back to rest it on his chest, and his arms slid around me. It was an actual hug, just me tilted onto his chest, my head tucked under his chin, and him wrapping his arms around me, like an actual couple sitting on a sofa. Then his muscles tightened for a moment and I heard him take one quick, deep breath, involuntarily. I froze, and waited. It happened: he relaxed, I felt his body unclench. It made me smile. It'll work, it's destiny. Or something.

"So . . . good, huh?" How else could I tell him?

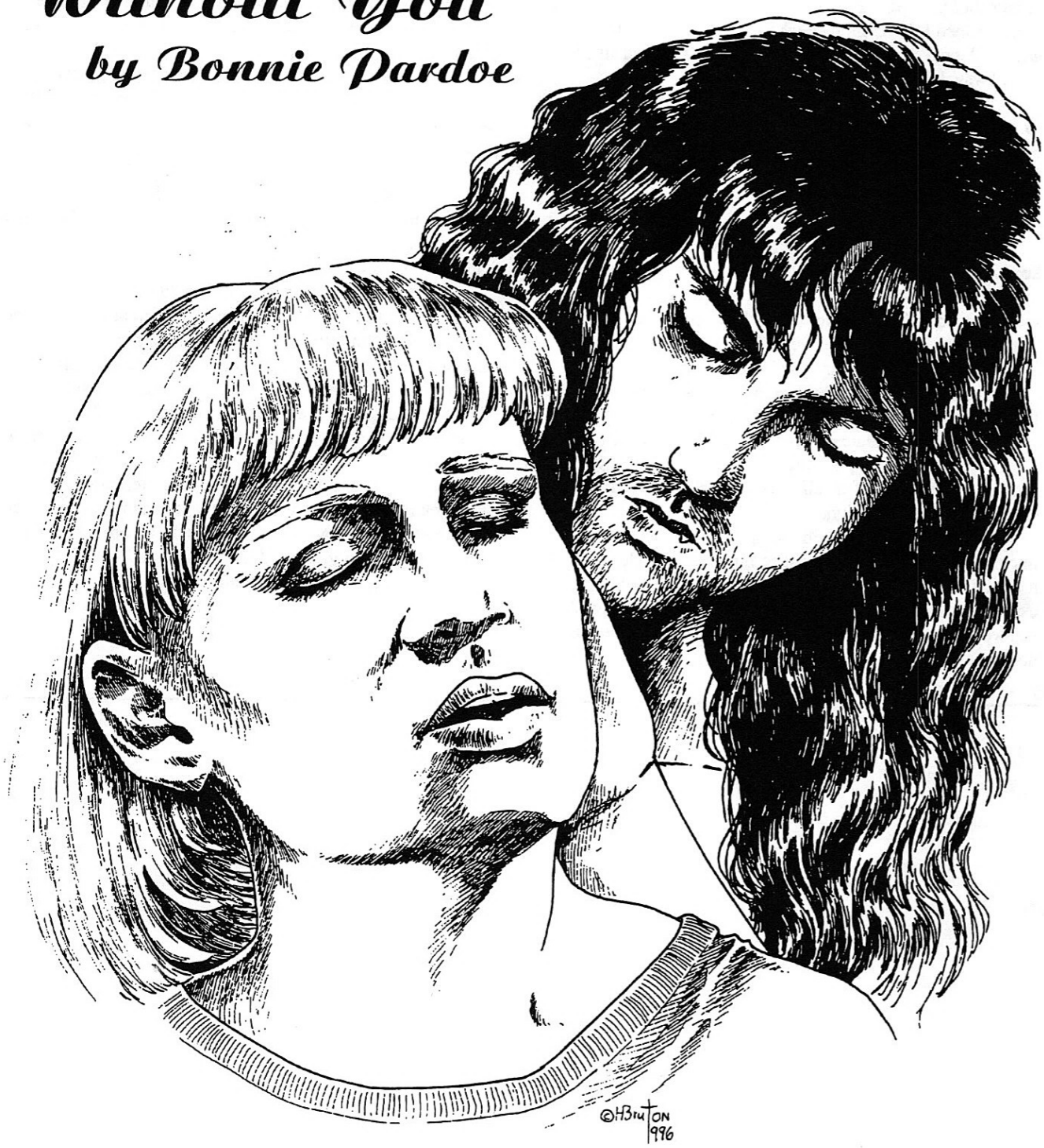
I felt his head tilt to the side, like it does when he's deep in confusion, and some of those freshly brushed soft black locks spilled down in front of my eyes.

"The best," he murmured into my hair.

end

Faraway Inside 3: Without You

by Bonnie Pardoe



The following is a Forever Knight alternate universe story, spanning the same time frame as "Ashes to Ashes" and "Last Knight." It directly follows Bonnie's earlier story, "A Little Death," which is a sequel to "Septicemia"—where in Javier Vachon is bitten by Divia and, instead of being staked, is saved from death by Dr. Natalie Lambert using a transfusion of blood from Tracy Vetter. Later, Vachon discovers that he is, at least under the current circumstances of being completely satiated with blood, able to merely sip from Tracy. "Septicemia" and "A Little Death" appear in Amantes de la Noche #1.

Two nights later:

Javier Vachon sat alone at the bar in the Raven, an untouched glass of warming red liquid on the counter before him. He absently ran his finger along the thin rim of the snifter. Urs was gone—he knew it, felt it. He had even seen her body at the morgue, but somehow he hoped that it was not true. If she was anywhere, she would be here—but she was not. Vachon had been here for hours waiting for her to arrive, knowing that she never would. He wondered if she finally found the release from this damned existence that she had sought for longer than he had known her.

Vachon cradled the glass of alcohol-preserved blood in his hands and raised it to his lips. He breathed in the thick, dull scent and idly wondered if he would ever regain his appetite.

"If I had more paying customers, I might be annoyed by your loitering." LaCroix, a too-dark eyebrow almost raised in question, stared down at the much younger vampire.

"Do you miss her, too?"

The non-sequitur did not seem to catch LaCroix off guard. "Ursula? Well, she did lend the place a certain something, didn't she? Not that any of the regulars are here to notice her absence."

Vachon looked about the club for the first time since he had arrived. There was usually an equal mixture of vampires and mortals, but tonight he could pick out only a few who did not have a regular heartbeat. The younger vampire wondered if that insane little bitch had made good on her threat after all: how many vampires besides Urs had Divia killed that night, just to hurt LaCroix? He hoped that Urs had not suffered the way he had—that she had been spared from the twisted urges Divia had infected him with.

Vachon put his snifter back on the bar and hung his head. He missed her. He needed her. Urs had been the only one who had loved him just as he was. She never asked anything of him and she was always there when he needed her—needed someone to talk to, someone to accept him, to just be there and not demand anything from him.

"What do you do when they're gone?" Vachon spoke almost to himself.

LaCroix took a slow sip from his glass before he answered. "An interesting question."

Vachon continued to study his drink, idly wondering if LaCroix had any cocktail umbrellas handy. A small smile crossed his face as he remembered Urs when they had been in Hawaii over fifty years ago—a cocktail umbrella in her hair, tucked behind her ear, and a purple-orchid lei about her neck as they strolled hand-in-hand along the moonlit beach. He had loved her then—he still did, but not like that. She had been his nightingale, his midnight world of white and gold. Urs had given him everything and the only thing he had ever given her was the one thing she never wanted—eternity.

"Hmmm. Intriguing." LaCroix's deep, languid voice brought Vachon back to the present.

He looked up at LaCroix and then followed his gaze to the front door of the Raven. Slowly descending the stairs was a tall, leggy blonde. She wore a plum-colored, velvet dress which barely covered the tops of her dark, thigh-high stockings, and a leather jacket—*Vachon's* leather jacket. If only she'd had a wooden stake in her hand, Tracy Vetter would have looked, literally, like she was dressed to kill.

Tracy walked across the dance floor, seemingly oblivious to the stares of everyone in the Raven. Vachon's mouth hung slightly open. "Tracy? What are you doing here?" *Dressed like that?* he added silently, to himself.

Instead of answering Vachon's question, she kissed him, hard, and practically climbed into his lap. Her long fingers raked through his dark, wavy hair, sending tingles down his spine. Just about the time Vachon started to wonder if she had lost the need to breathe, Tracy broke the kiss. She whispered in his ear, "I need you. Dance with me," and then dragged him out onto the dance floor.

Vachon was mesmerized by her; Tracy moved to the music like it was flowing through her. Her hips swayed seductively, her feet seemed to barely touch the floor, and her hands were everywhere: in her hair, down her sides, across her body. She sidled up to Vachon and pressed her pelvis against his, driving the beat of the music right into his bones. Vachon had never been attracted to sexually aggressive women before, but tonight Tracy was pushing all the right buttons. He grabbed her hips and pulled her even closer. The young-looking vampire buried his head in her hair, in the crook of her neck—her heady scent filled him with mortal desire, the adrenaline in her blood seemed to bubble right up through her skin. His dark eyes blurred into gold as he deftly stripped the leather jacket off her. Tracy's fingers expertly worked over the buttons on his black shirt and soon her warm hands slipped beneath the fabric. Vachon grabbed Tracy roughly about the waist and spun her around; he dipped her low and kissed her like he had never dared kiss a mortal before.

The sound of applause broke the moment and Vachon straightened up to find that the crowd, which had vacated the dance floor for them, was quite enjoying the little show he and Tracy had just put on. He also noticed LaCroix staring at them from behind the bar. Vachon decided that it would be best if they took this somewhere a bit more private. He grabbed his leather jacket off the floor, took Tracy's hand, and led her out of the club.

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Vachon was relieved when they finally stepped inside Tracy's apartment. He was actually surprised that they had made it all in one piece—he never appreciated how much

concentration it took to drive a car, *especially while a lovely blonde is giving you a blow job.* Vachon had never seen Tracy like this before—this was not the same shy, sweet girl he had cuddled just two nights before. Not the same girl who had blushed as hotly as Natalie when the doctor had walked in on them lying still-naked on the couch.

"Tracy—" She kissed Vachon before he could finish his sentence. He grabbed her shoulders and held her back from him. He stared at her, concentrating hard on her face. Tracy was turning him on like no woman had in a long time and, although he was enjoying it immensely, he didn't understand it. "What's with you tonight?"

Tracy bit her lower lip and dropped her gaze from his. She looked back up at him from beneath her pale bangs, then reached out to him. She put her hand on his shoulder, and slowly let it fall, caressing the length of his torso. "I want to be with you, Vachon, like before."

Tracy took Vachon's hand and led him over to her bed, where he sat down as she indicated. She tugged off his heavy black boots and then crawled on top of him, smothering him with hot, wet kisses. Tracy nibbled on his earlobe, sending shivers all the way down to his toes.

Still in control of his senses, but almost wishing he wasn't, Vachon returned her kisses. He undid the zipper down the back of Tracy's crushed-velvet mini-dress and stripped it off over her head. The view of her in an enticing black-lace bra and matching panties was almost more than he could stand.

The vampire picked her up and threw her down on her back. Tracy shrieked at the sudden move and she looked as though he had made her head spin. Vachon climbed on top of her, gripped her head between his hands, and stared down at her with his feral-yellow eyes. Tracy stared back at him, as if seeing him for the first time. Her brows furrowed even as her blue eyes grew wide. She looked as though she was about to scream out in terror. Vachon instantly released her and sat back on his heels. Tracy quickly sat up with a wild, panicky look in her eyes. She shook her head and held out her hand, warding him off as she backed up against the head-board of her bed.

Vachon forced his eyes back to their normal, languid brown. Tracy had never reacted this way to him before. "Tracy? It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. I promise. Will you trust me?" He slowly stretched his hand out to her.

The fear receded from her features and was replaced for a moment by a look of confusion. Tracy met Vachon's eyes again and, suddenly, a large, wicked grin spread across her face. She pounced on Vachon in a fit of giggles. Tracy kissed him hard and he returned it, at first hesitantly, but then growing to a level of passion to match her own.

She slid her hands under the fabric of his still unbuttoned shirt and slipped it off his shoulders. Tracy then squirmed out from under him and kneeled on the floor beside the bed—he stood and she help strip off his dark jeans. He took her hand in a gallant gesture and helped Tracy back to her feet. Vachon kissed her hair and her cheeks. He trailed cool kisses across her skin, down her chest—his hands lingering possessively on her lace-clad breasts. He pressed kisses across her flat belly as his hands found the lace trim of her panties. Vachon slipped a hand in through the leg opening and found her coarse, curly pubic hair; she giggled at his touch. His fingers sought further and finally Tracy blessed him with a low moan. His hand lingered on her soft, moist flesh as she clutched at his hair and shoulders for support—he smiled when he finally felt her shiver.

Vachon flung the bedspread to the floor, then scooped Tracy up effortlessly in his arms. She pulled his face close to hers and then kissed the tip of his nose. Tracy began to giggle again, this time uncontrollably—her body shaking from the laughter. Vachon was beginning to wonder if she was drunk, but he could detect no smell of alcohol in her blood. Her mirth was infectious and he began to laugh, too, until she reached up to kiss his nose again and bit it instead. In his surprise, Vachon nearly dropped her. He was, luckily, able to toss her onto the bed before he lost his hold on her. Tracy lay sprawled across the bed, still giggling. He stood above her and gazed down—she was still clad in the thigh-high stockings and the lacy underwear. Vachon reached down and slipped his fingers under the elastic waistband of the black panties. Carefully, when he was sure his fingers were free of any stray hairs, he gripped the top of the panties and ripped them off her hips. This unexpected move instantly quelled Tracy's spasmodic laughter. She stared up at Vachon for an eternity. He saw the mirth slowly drain out of her brilliant blue eyes. Eventually, she held her arms out to him like a helpless little girl. He reached down and picked her up, hugging her closely.

"Hold me," she mumbled as she began to cry on his shoulder.

"Shhh." Vachon held her close and stroked her pale locks, much as he had done over the centuries with Urs. Vachon did not understand this change of mood, but figured it must be a female thing. He sat down on the edge of the bed and cradled Tracy in his lap. He rocked her gently in his arms until her sobs lightened and she began gently kissing the cool skin of his shoulder.

In the smallest of child-like voices, she whispered in his ear, "I want you."

Vachon gently kissed her salty wet lashes; he followed the tear-strains down her cheeks to her lips. His first kiss was hesitant, gentle. "Tracy, I . . . I don't know if we can do this again. I might take too much. I could kill you."

"Then here's a kiss for luck." She pressed her parted, warm lips to his, and threaded her fingers through his hair.

Vachon pulled back and looked into Tracy's face. The need and desire were plain in her eyes. He turned and gently laid her down upon the bed.

Vachon ran his hands over Tracy's very warm shoulders. He caressed the ever-so-soft skin down her chest and feathered his fingers over her lace-clad breasts. His fingers found the front clasp of her bra and undid it. His cool hands lingered long on her breasts, taunting her taut nipples. Tracy kissed him frantically as she tried to reposition her hips under him. Vachon maneuvered himself into position and finally thrust deeply inside, eliciting a small cry of pain from her. He stared down at Tracy, unmoving, until she un-squinted and opened her lovely blue eyes.

Tracy was the most beautiful angel he had ever gazed upon. Her alabaster skin, her soft lips, her golden halo of silken tresses.

"*Te amo,*" he breathed, not realizing what he had just uttered aloud. Vachon kissed her tender lips as he began to rock gently in and out of her. She arched her back and kept time with her hips. Tracy's tongue darted playfully about his mouth, meeting his tongue, caressing his descended fangs. Vachon's thrusts quickly became harder, faster, and deeper; Tracy's moans of pleasure just as quickly turned to cries of ecstasy. She raked her fingers down Vachon's back as she clung to him, and Vachon smelled his own blood scenting the air.

Tracy began to moan, almost shout, as she turned her head, giving Vachon her bare neck. "Now. Now! I want you—now!" She cried out in a weird mixture of pleasure and pain as Vachon's fangs broke the tender skin of her neck.

Tracy's heady, warm blood filled his mouth, and he gulped it down, greedily taking another mouthful. Her blood held the same images and feelings it had their first night together, but there was more this time—something oddly familiar and yet . . .

Vachon pulled back to stared down at Tracy—her golden features glowing with the pleasures of their coupling. Instinct drove Vachon to take more blood, but he fought the urge and kissed her instead. Tracy clung desperately to him as her orgasm burst across her body. She screamed again with each additional thrust—Vachon plunged deeply inside her, then deeper still—until his own orgasm broke free.

The salty sweat of her body mixed freely with the blood sweat of his as they lay entangled upon her bed. Vachon's head lay upon her shoulder, his hand gently stroking her cheek. "*Mi dulce Teresa,*" he breathed before he kissed her. He laid back down against her side and began to drift off to sleep.

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Near dawn, Vachon finally stirred from his sleep. For several minutes, he lay in Tracy's arms, reveling in her wonderful aroma, wondering if he should spend the day or return to the confines of the church. Vachon finally decided that Tracy should probably rest. *Besides, the last thing I need is for Doctor Lambert to catch me here after that lecture she gave me the other night!*

He stealthily edged off the bed and began gathering up his three articles of clothing and his pair of boots. He tugged his jeans on over his hips as he walked out into the front room of Tracy's apartment. Vachon sat down on the arm of the couch, slipped his boots on and began re-lacing them.

He glanced about the apartment for the first time since his arrival several hours before and was slightly surprised by the sights. The place was messier than usual—not filthy compared to the dusty church he was presently residing in, but the apartment was definitely not in its usual, pristine state. There were a few dirty dishes stacked next to the sink; an empty frozen-food box was lying on the counter; several pieces of discarded junk mail littered the floor around the black, plastic trash-basket; and the sections of a newspapers were loosely scattered over the couch, coffee table, and floor. Had the apartment belonged to anyone but Tracy Vetter, the mess would not have disturbed him. He looked back toward the bed where Tracy still slept, then he glanced about the room again. *What is with you, Trace?* he thought for the second time that night. Vachon took a step toward the bedroom, then out the open living room window he noticed the lightening of the morning sky. *Damn.* He didn't have time. *Tonight.* He would talk with her tonight. *We need to talk about what's going on with us anyway, before I end up killing you.*

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Nick noticed Tracy as soon as she strolled into the precinct the next night. There was something different about her, but he couldn't quite figure out what it was. He wondered if she had gotten her hair cut or something.

"Hey, Nick! What's going on?" Tracy looked around the crowded squad room. There were more blue uniforms milling about than was usual for an average night in Toronto.

"A perp got loose in the station. I caught up with him in the locker room."

"Your partner took an awful chance tonight, Vetter." Reese had come up behind them with a handful of files. "You're just lucky, Knight, that those two bullets ended up in the wall instead of in you!"

"Wow! Sorry I missed the fireworks." Tracy smiled as she tucked her hands into the pockets of her jeans and rocked back on her heels.

Nick furrowed his brow at his partner, surprised by her reaction. Usually Tracy was the first one to voice concern and relief after a dangerous situation.

"What are you doing here, anyway, Vetter?" Reese narrowed his eyes at the young detective, as he gestured at her with the manila file folders. "Dr. Lambert said that you'd be out until the end of the week."

"I'm bored out of my mind, Cap. I'm feeling a lot better and thought I'd just stop in for a little while." Tracy plopped herself down into the chair at her desk, as if to quell any arguments about her staying.

Reese stared silently at the Commissioner's daughter for a few moments. Finally, he said, "Well, I'm glad that you're better. But don't push it. I don't want any detectives falling down sick on my shift. Okay, Vetter?"

"Sure thing." She smiled a pleasant—though, Nick thought, less-than-sincere—smile at their captain as Reese made his way back to his office and shut the door.

"So, Nick. What's going on? Any cases I can help out with?" Tracy popped back up out of her chair as eager as ever, a huge smile running across her face.

"Well, if you really want to help, Tracy, here." Nick handed her a thick stack of files and a loose pile of forms.

"Paperwork? I said I was bored and you hand me paperwork?" Tracy's voice was hard and steady, and the earlier smile was nowhere to be found in her features.

Nick was taken aback by her attitude, unsure how to respond to such an uncharacteristic tone. "I've been a bit busy around here since you've been gone—doing the foot work of two takes more time than you might imagine." Nick smiled and tried to make light of the situation but was having no luck.

Tracy quickly leafed through the stack of folders, grabbed

the top third and threw them on the desk. "Well, that accounts for these files, but what about the rest? There's some in here from last month! For crying out loud, Nick! You may think seniority gives you the right to foist your share of the paperwork off on me, but you're wrong. I'm your partner, not your secretary, and I've had it up to here with this attitude of yours. What the hell is your problem anyway?" Tracy's voice had grown louder and angrier until the entire squad room was staring at them.

"Look, Tracy, I'm sorry." Nick was not sure what had set Tracy off, but if she was fishing for an apology, he intended to give it to her, to get her off his back if nothing else. "You're right, I haven't been doing my share and that's not fair to you. I—" Nick was suddenly cut off by Reese.

"Knight! Vetter!" He motioned them into his office. "There's been a murder down at The Eaton's Centre. M.E.'s on her way."

"Right, Cap!" Tracy and Nick replied in unison.

"Vetter? Are you up to this?"

"I'm okay, Cap. Really. I'll just ride along." Tracy gave him a big smile before heading out.

"I'll keep an eye on her," Nick reassured his captain.

❑❑❑❑❑

The victim was young, about fourteen, with an equal number of stab wounds in his chest; it was impossible to tell which ones had been fatal and which were simply over-kill. Tracy kneeled down next to the body after Natalie had finished her preliminary exam. The young detective pulled the sheet up from the body and stared as if transfixed at the bloody gore that was left of the boy's chest. A twisted smile crossed her lips as she poked the end of her pen into one of the puncture wounds.

"Tracy?"

Startled by Natalie's voice, Tracy quickly stood up and let the sheet fall back into place over the body.

"This really isn't the best place for you right now. You should still be home resting." Natalie was using her best calm-doctor voice-of-reason with the younger woman.

"I know, Nat, but I was so bored. I thought I'd just hang out for awhile."

"Well, you are looking awfully tired to me." Natalie's voice was quiet and low. "We're just about finished up here; why don't you let Nick take you home?"

"I'm okay, Nat."

"Doctor's orders." She turned and motioned to the other detective. "Nick? Tracy's about ready to head home. Would you mind?"

Nick shook his head and led the way. "I'll see you back at the morgue."

He and Tracy were halfway down the concourse when Tracy finally broke the silence. "What's up with Natalie? She seems kinda tired."

"An old friend of hers just died—suicide. She's pretty down about it."

"Suicide, eh? Sleeping pills?"

"Ah, no." Nick narrowed his eyes at Tracy, wondering why she was not more concerned about Natalie. "She slit her wrists." Nick did not see the small smile that brightened Tracy's eyes.

"Really? Well, I'm sorry for Natalie. Is she going to be okay?"

"I hope so." Nick tried to sound confident, but he was hard-pressed to pull it off. He had never seen Natalie so depressed and upset before.

Tracy slowed her pace and placed a hand to her temple.

"Tracy? You are looking a bit pale." Nick heard her heart beating faster than normal, and sensed that her body temperature was up as well. "You really should have stayed home. A bloody murder scene is no place for you right now."

"I'm fine, Nick." Tracy's voice was tense and extremely controlled. "Why does everyone— aarrgghh!" Tracy clutched at her stomach and fell to her knees.

"Tracy? Tracy! What's wrong?" Nick was instantly at her side.

Tracy continued to moan and clutch at her gut.

"Tracy. Here, let me help you." Nick put his arms around Tracy's shoulders to help her over to the bench—he noticed a twin set of bite marks on her pale neck. They looked fresh; one pair was still oozing slightly.

"I'm fine." She managed to grunt out between her clenched teeth. "Leave me alone!" she practically screamed as she suddenly stood up. Completely catching her partner off guard, Tracy shoved him against the nearby wall. Nick's eyes uncontrollably flared gold—Tracy was staring directly into his face when it happened. Her blue eyes grew wide and her mouth dropped open. "Oh, my god," she barely whispered.

Nick forced his eyes quickly back to their natural blue. "It's okay, Tracy." Nick could smell the tang of adrenaline which now tainted her blood as well as her sweat.

"Oh, my god!" She shook her head at him and held out her hand to ward him off. "No. Stay away from me."

"Tracy." Nick instinctively trying to force his words into her mind. "I'm not going to hurt you." He took a slow, measured step toward his partner.

"Stay away from me," she screamed before she turned to run. "Stay away!" She glanced back over her shoulder—Nick was pursuing her through the sparse crowd in the mall. "No! Stay away!"

Nick ran as fast as way humanly possible after Tracy as she dashed down the stairs, heading toward the underground subway station. Tracy effortlessly vaulted over the turnstile at the station. She was now screaming for help as Nick was closing distance on her. Suddenly, Nick came face to face with the subway security guard, and he lost Tracy as she ran down the stairs toward the southbound trains. By the time Nick had convinced the guard that he was a police detective and had gotten downstairs, Tracy was nowhere to be found. He did not know if she had taken the far stairs up to the street or if she had caught a train.

Nick had no idea where she might be headed. The fang marks worried him, and he was reluctant to put out an A.P.B. if this had anything to do with vampires. *Where would she go? To Vachon? No.* Nick shook his head. Something concerning vampires had certainly terrified her—*someone* had bitten her at the very least. If it had been Vachon . . . If Vachon had attacked her, he would be the last person Tracy would run to.

If you've done this, Vachon, I will kill you!

Nick made his way upstairs and out onto the street—he glanced around for Tracy, not really expecting her to still be in sight. He found a deep patch of shadow and decided to make an aerial sweep for her before hunting down Vachon.

❑❑❑❑❑

Tracy stumbled into the abandoned church. Vachon was at her side as soon as he saw her. "Tracy! What's happened?" She practically collapsed as soon as he had his arms around her.

"He's after me, Vachon! You have to help me!"

"Who, Tracy? Who's after you?"

"You have to—" Tracy lost consciousness and slipped from Vachon's hands to the floor.

"Tracy? Tracy! Shit!" Vachon was momentarily at a loss—did he take her to the hospital? Or . . . or what? *Dr. Lambert.* He grabbed his cellular phone and dialed Natalie's number.

Three impossibly long rings later, the phone was finally answered.

"Doc, it's Vachon. Tracy's collapsed here at the church. What do I do? . . . I think so." Vachon turned his head toward Tracy and listened for a moment. "Yeah, she's still breathing—just unconscious." He nodded his head. "Okay. The door's unlocked. Hurry."

Vachon paced for a moment, anxious for Dr. Lambert to arrive, before kneeling down next to Tracy on the floor.

❑❑❑❑❑

Nick arrived at the church, having had no luck in locating his delusional partner. As soon as he entered the nave, he saw Tracy lying on the floor with Vachon bent over her. Nick was upon the younger vampire in an instant. They flew across the room, Nick slamming Vachon into the nearest wall. "What have you done to her?" Nick's eyes were a fierce yellow and his fangs slurred the growl of his speech.

"Nothing. I swear." The younger vampire managed to choke out the words.

"Then explain the bite marks." Nick's voice was low and guttural.

Vachon tried to swallow, but Nick's tight grip on his throat prevented even that simple movement.

"Nick! Put him down!" Nat ordered as soon as she walked into the church. Vachon was thankful, yet again, for the existence of Dr. Natalie Lambert.

"He's bitten her." Nick's eyes and teeth had returned to normal and he let up on Vachon enough so that the younger vampire slid back down the wall and had his feet firmly on the floor again. Nick did not, however, remove his hand from around Vachon's throat.

Natalie bent down next to Tracy and felt for a pulse—it was strong but fast. She turned Tracy's neck slightly to the side and saw the same bite marks that Nick had seen earlier.

"These haven't even begun to heal," Natalie thought out loud. "Vachon, what happened?"

Vachon dropped his gaze to the floor and Nick took the opportunity to slam him back into the wall.

"Nick—stop it!" Natalie's voice then turned calm and soothing, encouraging, again. "Vachon, you have to tell me so I can help her."

"We had sex." Stunned by Vachon's words, Nick suddenly released his grip on the vampire. Vachon took the opportunity to finally swallow. "Twice."

"Twice?" Natalie whispered, almost to herself. She glanced from Nick to Vachon and back again.

Nick's hand was back on Vachon's throat and the younger vampire again found himself a foot off the floor. "You could have killed her," Nick growled at Vachon.

"Nick—put him down!" Nat shouted at Nick and he obeyed.

"She walked away from it both times." Vachon rubbed at his barely-still-intact neck. Vachon glanced up and met Nick's glare. "I had it under control."

Nick narrowed his eyes at the dark vampire. He had a hard time believing Vachon, given his own past experiences. *No one that young can have that much control. Can they?*

"She's burning up with fever." Natalie brought their attention back where it belonged, to Tracy. "Help me get her off the floor. Vachon, do you have a bed around here?"

Vachon led them into an adjacent room where the windows had been completely boarded over—the room was empty except for a bed, a few dusty candelabra, and some wooden crates.

"How was Tracy earlier this evening?" Natalie stared at the two sullen men, waiting for one of them to say something. She finally prompted, "Nick?"

Natalie listened patiently as Nick related what had happened earlier, both at the precinct and at the mall. Then Nat turned to Vachon.

"Well," Vachon began, slightly embarrassed. "She was the one who came to me the second time—found me at the Raven last night. She was acting very . . . forward. She wanted sex and she . . . let me know it plain and simple."

The doctor looked very confused by all of this. "That doesn't sound like Tracy at all."

"Tell me about it, but . . . who was I to turn her down?" A smile crept over Vachon's face, which just as quickly fled as Nick turned a harsh, disapproving glare upon him. Natalie continued to stare at Vachon, as if encouraging him to continue. "There was something else—when I took her blood, it was different from the first time. I don't quite know what it was—I've never taken blood twice from the same mortal." Vachon turned to the older vampire. "There was something odd about it. Is that normal?"

Nick shook his head, almost embarrassed to be discussing this in front of Natalie. "No." He thought back: Amalia's blood had been so sweet each time he had sipped from her. "It should taste the same, maybe a bit stronger because of its familiarity, but not different." Vachon had been able to stop with Tracy, as Nick had been able to stop with Amalia, taking just a little. But Nick remembered the urge to take more, to possess every drop of her; it had increased each time until he had finally drained her. *Will Vachon reach this point with Tracy as well?* Nick found Natalie staring up into his face, her eyebrows raised

high—there was still so much that he had never confided in Natalie, so much that he never really wanted her to know about him, about his past.

Natalie blinked and shook her head. "Sounds like this has something to do with her blood. Could there be something that transferred from Vachon to Tracy when he bit her the first time?"

"There is only one thing you can catch from a vampire, Nat, and Tracy is still mortal." *Otherwise Vachon would not still be alive,* Nick silently added to himself.

"But you said that there are . . . ah, 'images' which transfer when someone is bitten—could Vachon have transferred images?"

"Well, yes. The images go both ways, but none should cause these erratic mood swings. And the images only remain for a few hours."

"What if the images were something residual from Divia's attack on Vachon?" Natalie looked pleased by this insight. She finally turned to Vachon. "These symptoms, are they similar to what you experienced?"

"It's still kinda blurry." Vachon tried to remember the events of several nights ago. "There was terrible pain in my head and in my body, like something was inside trying to claw its way out. And there were images. . . . No, they . . . they were more than simple images. It was like she was inside my head, driving me to do things . . . deplorable things. . . . I could . . . barely control it."

"Is it possible, Nick? That whatever Divia infected Vachon with, Vachon passed it on to Tracy?"

"I . . . I don't know." Nick shook his head. "She was so old, so powerful—even LaCroix was overwhelmed by her."

"If Tracy is infected, I don't know what I can do about it." Nat shrugged her shoulders in frustration.

"Can't you do for her what you did for me? Drain her and then give her a transfusion?" There was more desperation in Vachon's voice than he wanted.

"She's mortal. I'd kill her if I took that much blood from her." Natalie shook her head at the suggestion.

"What if we bring her across first?" Vachon looked from the doctor to Nick, hope brightening his dark eyes.

"No!" Nick's response was so firm that Vachon's protest died on his lips.

"It's just too risky, Vachon." The doctor hung her head. "I'll take some blood and compare it with some of yours back at the lab. Maybe it will tell me something." There was but faint hope in Natalie's voice. She knelt down next to Tracy and opened her medical bag.

Vachon paced, like a caged jungle cat, not far from the bed where Tracy lay still unconscious. *Dammit. This isn't my fault! It can't be. She was okay afterwards. She was!*

The sound of Natalie's soft voice broke through his reverie. "I'll get these back to the lab." She held up 2 five-milliliter vials, both filled with Tracy's blood. "I gave her an antibiotic shot while I was at it. Call me if there is any change in her condition." Nat gave Vachon a small smile of reassurance. "I'll let you know if I find anything."

Vachon nodded at the doctor. Fear clutched at his heart; her tone was identical to that which she used the night she had examined Screed, not long before he died.

Natalie walked toward the door, but stopped when she neared Nick, who was leaning against the door jamb. "Are you staying, Nick?"

"I think I should." Nick looked from Tracy to Vachon as he spoke.

Though their words were low, Vachon heard them clearly. In that moment, he realized that both Nick and his doctor friend blamed him for Tracy's current condition, and neither now trusted him with her. "Get out! Now—both of you!" Vachon's deep voice, filled with barely contained anger, echoed through the condemned church. He stepped possessively between Tracy's bed and where Nick and Natalie stood. He would not meet the doctor's eyes, but he fixed a hard stare on the elder vampire. "She's MY responsibility!"

Nick returned the Spaniard's glare. "If she dies, Vachon, you die."

If she dies, you won't have to bother, Vachon retorted silently to himself. "Get out." Vachon's voice was as low and controlled as Nick's had been.

Natalie put her hand on Nick's arm, then they both turned to leave.

Once alone, Vachon began to pace the floor again. He clenched and unclenched his fists, frustrated that he could not do anything for Tracy—worried that Knight might actually be right, that he could very well be the cause of all of this.

"Ah, Trace. What have I done to you? I should have left Toronto when I had the chance last summer." Vachon's thoughts turned to Screed and Urs—both gone now, because of him, because they had stayed in Toronto with him. *No, that's not true. They were going to stay anyway. But Tracy . . .*

Vachon sat on the edge of the bed and stared down at Tracy, lying there so helpless. "Don't die on me, Trace."

He absently straightened the blanket over her, then smoothed a stray strand of pale hair off her cheek. "Not you, too."

He took her limp, warm hand in his and pressed his cold lips to her palm. Faint pink droplets fell and were instantly absorbed by the dark, cotton blanket.

❑❑❑❑❑

Vachon's leg dangled over the arm of an old, over-stuffed chair, which he had dragged in from another room and placed next to his bed—the bed that Tracy was still lying in. She had been unconscious for hours—days, it seemed to Vachon—with change only for the worse. Her fever had risen, causing both chills and sweats. She would toss and turn for long periods, mumbling words Vachon could never quite catch. There was nothing he could do for her—nothing anyone could do for her.

Vachon cradled the cellular phone next to his ear as he continued to stare over at Tracy. "Doc, her fever is still high, and she's not woken up."

"I don't know what to tell you, Vachon. I haven't been able to find anything to help her." Natalie was silent on the other end of the telephone line for a moment. "It's like nothing I've ever seen—of course, that describes practically every medical situation involving you guys. Her white blood cell

count is way up, which is why she's feverish—it's like her body is fighting a virus or something. Problem is, I can't isolate whatever is causing the 'infection.' There's nothing I can do for her right now. I need more time."

"You can't just let her die, Doc."

"I'm not going to give up, Vachon. I care about her, too, and so does Nick. We're working on it as best we can."

"I know. Thanks." Vachon closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Just stay with her . . . and keep me posted."

❑❑❑❑❑

Vachon got up out of his chair as soon as he felt the presence of another vampire in the church. *Knight. What the hell does he want?*

It was nearing dawn as Nick walked into the back room of the chapel. He found Vachon staring at the floor and pacing in front of the bed Tracy still occupied. Nick gestured toward his young partner with a nod of his head. "How is she?"

"Not good." The younger vampire did not look up at his visitor. The tone in his voice was cold, almost hopeless. "Has your doctor friend found anything helpful yet?"

Nick shook his head slightly. "She's still working on it. She'll keep working on it until—"

"Until Tracy's dead and it doesn't matter anymore?"

"No! Until she finds something which can help Tracy."

Vachon sighed heavily, then fell back into the chair near the bed. "Sorry."

"We're worried about her, too, Vachon. Nat is doing everything she can. She thinks that this has something to do with you getting Tracy's blood during your transfusion and then you biting her before you were fully recovered from Divia's attack. That it was some element of Divia that you tasted in Tracy's blood that second time."

"So this is my fault? Well, as much as I don't want her lying there, Knight, I am not going to take the blame for this. We didn't plan for it to happen, it just did. And she wanted it as much as I did."

"And what were you going to do if you took too much?" Nick fought to keep his tone even, patient.

"That didn't happen."

"No, but it could have. It *will,* if she recovers and the two of you continue the way you have been."

Vachon glared at the elder vampire—he did not appreciate being lectured, especially on a subject he had already been pondering. "So, what do *you* want me to do about it, Knight?"

"Stop. Leave . . . before either of you can't stop what will certainly become a deadly compulsion." Amalia's sweet face flashed through Nick's mind for a moment. *Believe me, I know,* he added to himself.

Vachon hung his head. "Leave. Yeah, I could leave." Vachon's tone was filled with nothing but resignation. *But what if she doesn't want me to leave? What if I don't want to leave?* Vachon—his eyes almost yellow, glaring defiance—looked up at Nick once again.

The dawn was fast approaching and both vampires knew it. "You've already endangered her. If she survives this, Vachon, don't trade her life for a few more hours of pleasure." *Don't trade your life.* The unspoken threat hung in the air between the two vampires for a few moments until Nick vanished from the church.

❑❑❑❑❑

It was near-on noon—an hour which Vachon had not seen in a long time, not that he would remember seeing this one. He paced the floor, much as he had done since Nick had left him just before dawn. Vachon hadn't feed since before Tracy's arrival. He knew that he should eat, but instead he fell into the old, over-stuffed chair near the foot of the bed. He picked up his electric guitar which he had left leaning against the arm. The guitar was not plugged into the amplifier, so he knew he would not bother Tracy with the sounds. He idly fingered the strings, caressing them. He began to strum a slow tune; the harmony echoed the shadows which surrounded his heart, and the melody engulfed his soul. Before long, his fingers slipped gently from the strings as he finally drifted off to sleep.

The sunny field Javito stood in was the one just over the hill from his family's villa. Children of a wide range of ages chased after one another; they were his childhood friends and siblings. His little sister grabbed his hand and pulled him along after her. Soon Javito was laughing with the others. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a glimmer of white light. Javito turned to see a beautiful, glowing specter step behind a large orange tree. Compelled, he followed—

—When he stepped behind the tree, Javier found himself on the main deck of a ship, The Santa Isabella. His fellow conquistadors were mulling about the upper decks. The sea was incredibly calm and no wind even ruffled the sails. A spare sail was spread out and buoyed in the sea as a pool; sailors and conquistadors alike frolicked in the shallow salt water. In the doorway which led below decks, the same beautiful, white figure beckoned to him. Javier made his way across the decks to follow her—

—He entered the darkened passage and found himself in an old warehouse. Javier Vachon was running—ducking between rows of crates—the Inca nearly on his heels. He knew there was a way out and he ran, flew, desperate to find it before his blood brother found him. Finally Javier Vachon was cornered: in front of him a solid wall, to the sides crates stacked to the ceiling, and behind the Inca approached. From between the boxes stepped the beautiful angel—

—She took his hand and led him out into the night. The sky was brilliant with a myriad of stars. He could see nothing else as he fell faster and faster, down toward the quickly rising earth. Then, blackness engulfed him. Vachon opened his eyes to find the angel staring down upon him. A pure-white light surrounded her, illuminating her golden halo. She knelt down to him and, unwillingly, he closed his eyes again.

Vachon's dark lashes fluttered open. "Tracy?" He remembered her at the site of the airplane crash last summer. The flood lights shining through her golden hair. "Tracy."

He shook off the last vestiges of sleep as he rose from the chair and went to his charge. Vachon sat softly on the edge of the bed and took Tracy's hand in his. It was much cooler to the touch now. He placed a hand on her brow and confirmed what his heightened senses were already telling him: her fever was gone.

Vachon stared down at Tracy's placid features. He moved his hand to her cheek and brushed a few stray strands of pale hair away. Vachon bent low and kissed her still lips. He scattered kisses across her cheek.

Vachon could hear her heart beating, strong and steady again. He nuzzled into the hair at the nape of her neck; her pulse beat against his cheek. He inhaled deeply. The smell of her filled his mind, reminding him of the savory images he had previously tasted.

His own breath was coming fast and he felt his fangs descend. He placed an open-mouthed kiss upon the enticing curve of her neck. Thoughts of their previous times together raced through his mind. The taste of her blood on his tongue, the feeling of it trickling down his throat: the warm sensations infusing his body, his mind, and his soul. He needed her, wanted her, more than anyone.

Vachon placed a gentle hand upon her chin and pushed her head aside to fully expose the alabaster skin of her neck. He breathed in the heady bouquet of her scent once more before baring his teeth. The urges for her, for her blood, quickened inside Vachon. The hunger to possess every last drop of her were almost overwhelming. A low growl escaped the vampire's lips as he, unable to control himself any longer, sunk his fangs deep into the tender flesh of Tracy's neck.

❑❑❑❑❑

Vachon silently entered Tracy's apartment for the last time. He set his duffel bag and guitar case down against the wall in the small hallway and glanced about the now-empty interior. The young-looking vampire remembered the first time he had visited Tracy here—she had offered him a can of soda without even thinking.

He could still picture Tracy's sunny smile across the kitchen counter as she tried to convince him to help her with something or other. He remembered discovering that she alphabetized not only the cans in her cupboard but the items in her refrigerator as well. Vachon recalled sitting on her couch watching movies—at first, Tracy had sat at the far end, as far away from him as possible while still remaining on the couch. He never knew if she had been more afraid of him or of herself. He remembered the last time they had been together on that couch—her bare skin glowing with a sheen of sweat, a tired but very happy smile on her lips.

"I need your help, Vachon."

Tracy stepped out of the bedroom and put her arms around his waist. He kissed her and reciprocated the hug. "Sure. What are supernatural chums for?" He flashed a brilliant smile at her which she was quick to return.

Tracy took Vachon's hand and dragged him into the other room. She picked up a bulky woolen sweater.

Vachon shook his head and pointed toward the grocery bag, half-full with other discarded items. "Did you call your captain?"

"Yeah. He nearly blew a gasket!" Tracy held a skimpy peach-colored, silk negligee up to her shoulders, taunting him with it. Vachon flashed her a wicked grin and she tossed it on top of the open suitcase. "He asked me if I'd told my father yet."

She picked up a pink ski-cap with a white pompon on the top—Vachon wrinkled his nose slightly and gave a decisive head shake. The hat and its matching scarf joined the contents of the large paper bag, ear-marked for the Salvation Army.

"Have you?"

Tracy shook her head. "He wasn't home, so I left a message—I left one for Mum, too. I told them that I loved them but I needed to get away for a while—take some time off, do some traveling. I hope they understand and don't send the Mounties after me."

Vachon gave Tracy an amused smile, then nodded. Just leaving was always easier. "What about Knight?"

"He was pretty upset—especially at you!"

"Figures."

"But mostly he's mad at himself—thinks this is somehow all his fault." Tracy hung her head as she sank down onto the floor. Vachon came over and sat next to her. He placed his hand gently under her chin and stroked her jawbone with his thumb. She smiled slightly at him. "I just wish he had trusted me enough to tell me sooner."

"Hey." He raised her chin slightly so that their eyes met. "When you keep a secret for eight hundred years, it becomes a hard habit to break." Vachon never thought that he would be defending Knight's actions, especially not to Tracy. "He was only trying to protect you. It's too dangerous for mortals to know who and what we are."

"Then you should have killed me that first night." The smile was gone from her face again.

"Yeah, I should have. But I . . . couldn't." Vachon shook his head slightly, still not quite sure what it was about her that had caused him to spare her life that night.

"How did you know that this is what I really wanted?"

"Here." He rolled up his sleeve and offered Tracy his arm. "Taste."

Almost uncontrollably, her blue eyes flared gold and she sunk her teeth into his pale flesh. His blood flowed into her mouth and she closed her eyes.

"It's all there. Who you are. Every experience. Every thought."

Tracy pulled back and licked the blood from her lips. "There's so much there. How can you sort through it all?"

"Practice. In time, you'll be able to pick out what you want to know, but you have to look for it." He remembered Urs again. What she really wanted had been in her blood, but Vachon had chosen not to see it.

Tracy kissed him again, and he eased her prone onto the floor.

"Oh!" Tracy suddenly pushed Vachon off and sat up. "I should call Natalie."

Vachon raised his eyebrows at his young companion. "Why?"

"I want to tell her . . . and I want to tell her why."

Vachon placed a hand on her arm. "I'm sure your ex-partner will take care of that."

"I don't think he understands, Vachon—not like Natalie might."

"Is it important that she understand?"

Tracy nodded. "She's in love with Nick, ya know." She gave Vachon another small smile. "I now know why they've never gotten together. But . . . If she knew how happy I was. . . . Well, it might make a difference."

"Trust me. No matter what the Doc wants or doesn't want, it is going to be Knight's decision—just as it was mine." Vachon stroked Tracy's cheek again. "If a vampire decides to take a mortal—to kill or bring across—there isn't much that mortal can do about it."

"What do you think Nick will do?"

Vachon shrugged. "Whatever he does, he'll do it with the best of intentions." Vachon was almost surprised by the sincerity of his statement.

"Do you think he knows how happy I am? That I am so glad to be with you?"

"You told him, didn't you?" Vachon waited for Tracy's confirming nod. "Well, then . . . Besides, if Knight thought for an instant that you weren't really happy, I'd be hanging from a stake on the door of the church right now, waiting for the dawn. And speaking of the dawn . . . are you going to be ready to go soon? The night is young, but it won't last forever."

Tracy gave Vachon one last, quick kiss, before reaching over to her suitcase. She snapped it shut, then stood up. Vachon grabbed the grocery bag as Tracy double-checked the closet and the drawers in the bathroom. She then wandered out to the living room—she stood in the center of the empty room and looked around. A small tear escaped down her cheek.

"Sad?" Vachon asked as he wiped the pink droplet away with his thumb.

Tracy nodded. "And scared. I can't believe I'm just up and leaving. I know why we need to go, but . . . I've never been without a home before."

He rubbed her shoulder and looked into her face. "What's that old saying? 'Home is where the heart is.'" Vachon smiled at her and took Tracy's hand in his. "Come on."

end

The Phoenix

by Nancy Warlocke

One

Natalie didn't know what was waiting for her at the hospital, or why she had agreed to go, because it could not be something she wanted anything to do with.

Too many memories there. The night Nick had taken a bullet in his head, how she'd rushed to his side with fresh human blood and a thousand excuses for why he was suddenly going to wake up even though half his brain had been blown away.

LaCroix had helped her out of that one, hadn't he? The old demon had always been there when you needed him, and even when you didn't. Most often when you didn't.

More bad memories . . . or maybe it was the non-memories that haunted her more, now. The non-memory of how she'd ended up at that very same hospital, as close to death from hypovolemic shock as it was possible to come. The non-memory of the week she'd spent in a coma as one organ system after another began the process of shutting down, but by the grace of God—yes, she still did believe in God—slowly began to function again.

It had taken her weeks to recover from the physical trauma of what the doctors so cluelessly referred to as "the assault." That's what they thought had happened. Someone had attacked her and her friend the cop in his apartment. Most of them thought it was the cop himself who had done it. He'd disappeared without a trace, after all.

Natalie had never told them they were right. She had sworn with what she had thought at the time was her dying breath that Nick was innocent. Nick hadn't tried to kill her.

That was at least true on one level. He hadn't *tried*—not consciously, anyway. And even when she had known that she was dying, that her blood vessels were collapsing as their precious fluid was drained from them, and felt her heart slow, then flutter, then halt altogether, she had not wanted him to stop draining her life, taking her being into himself.

He'd told her once that everything she thought and felt was in her blood. Had he felt that she wanted him to keep making a vampire's love to her until he could no longer? Until there was nothing left for him to take, nothing left for her to give? Was that why he had done it? Was that why he had not been able to stop even though he had to have known he was killing her?

Or had he simply forgotten it was her, and been unable to stop like always? Had she meant so little to him that, in the end, she had just become helpless prey to a vicious predator, and stopped being Natalie to Nick Knight?

No! Nick would never think of her in that way . . . She had to convince herself of that. If she didn't, the pain would be more than she could bear.

By the time she was able to ask these questions, there was no longer anyone left to ask them of. Nick was gone. The entire Toronto police force had been unable to find a trace of him, and it was not because they hadn't looked.

They'd never find him, she knew. And he wouldn't be back.

She thought she'd learned to live with that until the call had come from Dr. Turner. The very same Dr. Turner who had pronounced Nick dead the night he'd been shot. The same Dr. Turner who treated her, the night of "the assault," and for some reason had not questioned that there was not a drop of blood *on* her, even though there was scarcely a drop of blood *in* her.

Nick had managed to be neat, if nothing else.

That night was rife with non-memories, for both her and Dr. Turner. The confused doctor would later apologize, looking uncertain and bewildered when Natalie had questioned her about it. How had she gotten to the hospital? Had anyone come with her? Who had identified her? When had the police realized Nick was missing? Dr. Turner didn't remember, and hadn't written any of it down. Usually, she was not that careless . . .

Dr. Turner had sounded hesitant when she'd called her.

One of "her" patients was there. Could she come down? That same puzzled voice, only this time not the result of a post-hypnotic haze.

Dr. Turner was puzzled because she knew Natalie had no patients. She knew what kind of a doctor Natalie Lambert was. Doctor to the dead. Formerly doctor to the Un-dead, but Turner didn't know about that. Only They knew about that, and They were all gone now.

Turner had described the patient to her. Nothing she said described Nick. Too young, not tall enough, dark hair and eyes.

So why was she daring, even as she pulled her car into the parking lot, to hope it was him? She had convinced herself she never wanted to see him again. She was done with vampires. She was over Nicholas de Brabant, bogus cop, real enough Creature of the Night.

But what if . . . ?

❑❑❑❑❑

Dr. Turner met her in the waiting room.

"I'm sorry to call you out at this hour, but he did say his doctor's name was Natalie Lambert, and you are the only Dr. Natalie Lambert there is."

"Who is he?"

"No ID. He won't tell us his name. He gave us the names of a couple of other people to call, but you were the only one we could make contact with. We can't get much out of him."

Natalie's curiosity was piqued, and that surprised her. She thought it had withered and died when she had lost Nick. Nothing much interested her anymore. Not her job, not what had become her excuse for a life, certainly not finding cures for sick vampires—or ways to change healthy ones into mortals. Still, They were the only ones who had ever called her doctor and meant it in the physician sense.

Natalie smelled him before she saw him. He was covered with dirt, and the dank, damp smell of it was everywhere. This

was real dirt, not the kind that accumulated from not bathing, although it was certain that whoever he was, he badly needed a bath. He wasn't on the gurney. He'd retreated to a dark corner of the examination room where he was violently refusing attempts by a nurse and an orderly to touch him.

Natalie moved in for a closer look. Scraggly dark hair, muddy leather jacket. She couldn't see his face clearly through the dirt, but she thought . . .

No, that wasn't possible. He was one of the dead ones. Nick had told her that himself. Tracy Vetter had put a stake in him, days before she herself had died.

But it was him. How that was possible, she didn't know, but she was sure of it.

She said his name softly, and then understood why he was in the corner.

"Can you turn off some of these lights?" she said.

The orderly fumbled to find the switches, and turned off everything but the fluorescent fixture over the supply table.

"Is that better?" Natalie asked Vachon.

He nodded.

"Be careful, Dr. Lambert," Dr. Turner said. "He might be dangerous."

Natalie wanted to laugh. *If only you knew . . .*

She put out her hand and he took it. It felt like the dried mud pies she'd made as a little girl. He was filthy.

"Have you run any tests?" she asked, and tried to make it sound like a professional question, although she had a million lies waiting to explain why the results would be abnormal if they had. Lies she had created for Nick, just in case, but now would never need to use.

"We tried to draw blood, but he won't let anyone near him. He'll probably need to be sedated . . ."

"I don't think that will be necessary," Natalie said.

She led Vachon to the gurney and he collapsed on it like a pile of rags. He seemed extremely weak, which Natalie knew meant he was probably also dangerously hungry.

Another memory stabbed at her. She didn't stash an emergency supply of blood in her fridge anymore.

"How did he get here?"

"A patrol unit found him lying on the sidewalk. He appeared disoriented, but they didn't think he'd been drinking."

That was something to think about. There was no way Vachon would have come along willingly, to this place where he would be tested and poked and questioned. He must have been too weak or too confused to get away, or to put up any kind of a fight.

She asked for a pen-light so she could pretend to examine him in the darkened room. She avoided shining it directly into his eyes. Even in the dim light, she could see they were flecked with gold. Hunger or fear or both.

Her mind began to run down a checklist of conditions that could cause his symptoms . . .

Autism seemed a bit too exotic.

Schizophrenia—they might hold him for psychiatric observation.

She needed something she could treat quickly and easily so she could get him out of there . . .

Then in the next instant, she found herself wondering why she should care. What did it matter to her, really, if they found out what Vachon was? Assuming they could even figure it out?

But it did matter. It mattered to Vachon. And she had to face it—it mattered to her because he could be Nick, at some other hospital in some other place, needing help and maybe not getting it.

"Is he diabetic?" Dr. Turner asked.

Of course! Bless the woman!

Natalie nodded, she hoped not too eagerly. "Good call, doctor. There's no sign of injury. I'd say he's probably in insulin shock."

"Do you want to order an IV?"

"No," Natalie said, as if this were routine to her. "Let's try some orange juice first, since he's conscious."

Vachon clearly didn't like that idea. Natalie put her hand on his shoulder to calm him.

Luckily, the ER was busy, and both the nurse and Dr. Turner were called away before the orderly returned with the juice, leaving Natalie alone with the vampire.

Vachon's voice was raspy when he spoke. "I can't drink that," he told her. "It hurts too much."

Natalie didn't understand him. "What hurts?"

"If it's not blood."

Pain? Was he trying to tell her real food caused them pain? Nick had never said anything about that. All the stuff she had forced him to eat, and he'd never told her once that it hurt him. Maybe it didn't. Maybe Vachon was just different in that regard.

"You won't have to drink it," she promised him

He gave her a faintly hopeful look. "I'm hungry."

She stroked his hair. How different it felt from Nick's. Thicker, coarser, certainly less well-kept than Nick's had been, but their hair, at least, felt human. "I know," she told him. "But you can't stay here, Vachon. It's not safe, for you or for them. I'll get blood for you as soon as I can."

He closed his eyes as if it was just too much of an effort to keep them open. For him to be this listless, it would have had to have been days since he'd last fed. How was he controlling himself? Why hadn't he just drained the first humans who had crossed his path, Natalie wondered?

It entered her mind that she could be in lethal danger. This vampire could grab her and suck her dry before she could blink.

Been there, done that, she thought. So what the hell if he did?

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The orderly brought the juice, but just as Natalie had counted on, he didn't stay to make sure Vachon actually drank it. Natalie gulped down most of it herself as she wrote up a phony chart, signed her name to it as attending physician, and then released him.

She found a wheelchair and made him get into it. She didn't know if she could hold him if he collapsed in the middle of the hallway, and she didn't want any excuses for Dr. Turner to keep him there. She folded his hand around the cup of juice, which now only contained a sip or two, just for appearances

sake.

"Stay here," she told him. "If anyone comes in, pretend to drink that."

This was an ER. Blood shouldn't be that hard to come by, Natalie thought, and she was right. A few more lies and faked documents later, she had four units of O-negative--nowhere near enough, but she dared not ask for more lest someone take note of the fact that there were no serious trauma cases in the ER at that moment.

She created a bag out of her coat and casually draped it over her arm with the blood tucked away out of sight.

She wished she had a pair of sunglasses for him. He didn't complain, but she could tell that once they were out in the main corridor, the bright lights hurt his eyes. Nick had adapted to that somehow, but he was an exception, and even Nick had preferred candlelight.

They almost made it to the parking lot exit before the ER nurse came running after them with the faked chart. Natalie tried not to look as nervous as she was. She really didn't like having to make up lie after lie as she had done so many times for Them. The day she got caught at it would have serious professional implications that could damage her career for good, and what else did she have left now other than her professional reputation?

Her stomach flipped as the nurse approached them, but she remained outwardly calm.

"What is it?" she asked with the impatience of someone who thought themselves vastly superior to whoever they were addressing. Unfortunately, this poor nurse was probably all too used to that.

"He didn't sign it. He needs to sign this and this," she flipped to two different forms. She handed Vachon the clipboard and a pen, and both slipped out of his hands.

She tried again, this time kneeling beside him and holding the clipboard for him.

Vachon struggled with the pen, and couldn't get a proper grip on it. The nurse looked up at Natalie.

"Are you sure he's okay? He still seems a little out of it . . ."

Natalie feigned annoyance and grabbed the clipboard. She hated being such a bitch. The nurse's concern was sincere, to say nothing of warranted. Vachon *did* seem out of it.

"I'll take care of it," she snapped. "Where do you want me to leave them?"

The nurse gave her one last suspicious look, but indicated the administrative desk.

As soon as she was on her way, Natalie took the pen out of Vachon's hand. It was easy enough to do. He wasn't actually holding it.

It occurred to her she had no idea what his first name was, and wasn't completely sure about his last name.

"I can write," he said softly when she asked him.

"Well, you fooled me, and I don't have all night to wait for you." Now that *was* deliberately hostile, and Natalie had no idea why. Partly it was nerves, but maybe it was also the idea that she once again found herself involved with a vampire, when she had thought that nightmare was over.

Verbally cowed into submission, Vachon gave her the information and she signed his name to the forms. What was one more act of forgery?

Two

As she brought the car around, she wondered exactly where she was going to take him. The Raven was closed down, at least as a haven for vampires. A few months before, she would have taken him to Nick's place, but the last time she'd been there—and she had tortured herself by going back—the alarm code had been changed. Vachon might not want to go back to his church and its memories . . .

It hit her then. He probably didn't know about his friend Urs. He was dying himself when she had been killed. And he certainly didn't know about Tracy Vetter, who, as it turned out, had only survived him by mere days. He didn't know he was alone now, unless he'd been around town for awhile and had found out somehow.

But Natalie doubted that. She felt the hair on the back of her neck rising when she finally allowed the thought that had been at the back of her mind to push forward into her consciousness. Like some ghoulish abomination in a horror movie, Vachon had crawled out of his grave, and probably no more than a few hours had passed since he had done so.

A numbing chill wrapped around her, and she seriously considered driving off and leaving him there.

They were predators. They survived. Let Vachon creep away on his own and find someplace to hide from the daylight. Let him find somewhere to hunt and feed in secrecy and get his strength back by himself.

But when she drove up to him, she knew she wouldn't do it. He was Nick again. A different face, a smaller body, but They were all Nick in one way or another.

She threw the car into Park and got out to help him.

"I'm taking you home with me for now," she told him. "You can clean up and get some rest."

No argument.

She handed the blood over to him as soon as the car was moving.

He didn't grab it in a frenzy and gulp it down the way she expected him to. (The way Nick would have.) He draped his hand over it to keep it from sliding to the floor, but that was all.

"Are you okay?" she asked him. Dumb question. If he was, he wouldn't be there.

But he nodded, and then turned to stare out the window.

"Thank you, Natalie, for helping me."

Now was as good a time as any, Natalie figured. "What happened, Vachon? I thought you were dead."

A hint of a smile. "So did I."

Natalie didn't want to think he had awakened to find himself buried alive, but that had to have been what had happened to him.

He put a hand on his chest. "She took the stake out. I didn't tell her she was supposed to leave it in."

"How long . . . ?" Natalie begin, but didn't quite know how to phrase the question.

"Before I knew I was alive?" He shrugged. "I'm not sure. There was so much pain . . . I couldn't move, or see or hear . . . or scream. I thought maybe that was Hell." A tiny laugh. "Then I had to . . . dig through the earth. I had no strength. I'd dig and then sleep. I don't know how long it took . . ."

"It's been months, Vachon."

Another little smile. "I guess that's why I smell so bad."

"How long have you been . . . uh . . . back?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. I knew I was out of the ground, but I still couldn't see or hear. That didn't come back until I was at the hospital."

"That must have been very frightening." She said that as small talk, and she should have known better. Despite their supernatural strengths and abilities, vampires still experienced emotion pretty much the same way humans did. The expression on Vachon's face told her the experience had been terrifying for him, and he didn't want to remember it.

She changed the subject. "I thought you said you were hungry?" She nodded at the blood.

He shrugged, shifted uncomfortably in the seat and closed his eyes, wincing as if the movement hurt him. "Maybe in a little while."

She was concerned because she'd never seen a vampire without an appetite for blood, and that included Nick on his best behavior, but frankly, she didn't want him spilling it in her car, either, so she wasn't going to force him to drink it.

She was lucky to find a parking space near the door of her building. There was an elevator inside, but several steps led to the front entrance of the building itself.

Vachon hesitated when he encountered them, long enough that Natalie asked him what the problem was.

He looked down at the steps, and seemed embarrassed. "I can't do this."

"Do what?" Natalie asked, and then realized he meant the steps. Was he really that weak?

At first she took his arm to support him, but she ended up literally lifting his feet up the steps, almost carrying him. It wasn't that far, and he wasn't that heavy, but it wasn't something she was used to. She was panting with exertion and sweating by the time they got to the top step. Vachon was shaking from the effort and didn't look like he could go any further.

"It's just a few feet," she said, coaxing him along. He managed the distance to the elevator somehow, and slumped against the wall. Natalie held on to him. If he hit the floor, she'd never be able to lift him. He was almost dead weight standing on his feet.

Finally, miraculously, they made it to her apartment. She opened the door and nudged Vachon through it. He collapsed on the floor in front of the couch.

She didn't even try to get him up. His strength was completely spent.

Sidney ran to her purring, as he always did. He didn't hesitate to jump over the vampire on the floor and ignore him entirely. Cats weren't afraid of vampires for some reason, or at least Sidney wasn't. Natalie had noticed that with Nick.

She unwrapped her coat from around the blood and offered Vachon a bag. He looked like he didn't know what to do with it.

She put her arm under his head and lifted it up, then held the bag to his mouth.

"It's blood. All you have to do is bite it . . ."

He tried it with his front teeth, which weren't any sharper than an ordinary human's. They wouldn't go through the plastic. His canines were further back in his jaw than Nick's had been, and he wouldn't open his mouth so she could shove the bag in far enough.

Natalie wondered if being buried alive hadn't somehow dropped his IQ by several points. She shook him to get his attention. "Fangs, Vachon, c'mon!"

It was hopeless. He just didn't get it. He was too exhausted or too starved to think straight, maybe both.

She got a pair of scissors, snipped the tubing close to the bag and tried pouring it into him. That only worked until he had more blood in his mouth than he could swallow, and he choked on it. He coughed out a generous spray of it that splattered across the couch and the carpet. But he was too weak to force the rest of it out, and lay there gasping for air while it drained into his lungs. She turned him on his side and gave him a couple of sharp blows between the shoulder blades and he managed a feeble cough that cleared his airway.

Natalie sat back on her heels, careful to pinch the tubing on the bag shut before any more of it ended up on the furniture. "Okay, that didn't work . . ."

Vachon had swallowed what was in his mouth and looked up at her. "I need more." He had that same look Nick would get when he'd been too long without feeding. "Please."

He wasn't asking politely—he was begging for it.

She hurried into the kitchen and emptied the bag into a small mixing bowl. She returned with the bowl and a spoon, settled herself on the floor and lifted his head into her lap.

She lifted the first spoonful to his lips and he went for it eagerly. He was so hungry, but he didn't seem able to swallow very much at once. She let him take his time, and tried not to think about the fact that she was actually sitting on her living room floor, spoon-feeding blood to a vampire.

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After the first bag, he was able to sit up.

She poured another bag into the bowl and handed it to him, but he had the same problem with the spoon that he'd had with the pen.

"What's the matter with your hands?"

He looked at them thoughtfully and then stated the obvious. "They don't work."

She took one in hers and saw that his fingers were stiff and unresponsive. He wasn't able to make a fist when she asked him to, and there was no strength in his grip.

His hands were also so dirty she couldn't see any actual skin.

"I guess I need a shower," he said, when he saw she'd noticed.

Natalie looked at the clock on her VCR. There was less than an hour left before the sun came up.

"Right now you need to eat," she said, and started spooning the second bag into him. "We'll worry about the dirt later."

He looked down at his grubby hands. "I once went two years without a bath."

She thought he was joking and then saw he wasn't.

"That's disgusting."

"It wasn't something people noticed back then, I guess."

"What made you finally decide you needed one?" she teased him.

"Lice."

"Ugh! And they talk about the good old days . . ."

"Don't think Nick doesn't know all about it."

Natalie's face clouded. "Nick is gone, Vachon."

She hoped he wouldn't ask any questions. She didn't want to tell him the whole story. How Nick had almost killed her—almost literally loved her to death. How she had fought to recover from that trauma only to find that he had disappeared. She had no idea if he had gone into hiding, or had left the city, or if he was dead. There was no one to ask. LaCroix was gone, too.

Vachon sensed her pain, and didn't push. "I'm sorry," he said simply.

"Yeah, me too . . . C'mon, eat."

He finished most of the second bag and didn't want any more.

"I thought you'd be a lot hungrier," she told him.

He nodded towards the window. "The sun's coming up. It's hard for me to stay awake."

She offered him her bed, even though he was so dirty that she was immensely relieved when he didn't accept the offer.

She helped him out of his leather jacket, which could have stood up by itself since the mud on it had dried. What had been a T-shirt was now little more than a decomposing rag, so she got that off of him, too. She taped black trash bags over the apartment's few windows as an added precaution before closing the blinds and drawing the drapes shut.

There was a large window in her bedroom, but she left that uncovered. She told herself it was because it wasn't necessary to cover it, so long as she kept the bedroom door closed, but in the back of her mind, she was thinking that even if it made it harder for her to sleep, she'd be safer with a little sunlight in the room.

She hardly knew Vachon, but she was keenly aware that he was not like Nick in one very important respect: He wasn't unhappy as a vampire, which meant he still killed when he could . . .

By the time she returned to the living room with an extra pillow and a blanket, Vachon was fast asleep. He didn't stir as she tucked the pillow under his head and covered him.

She noticed too late that Sidney had lapped up the few remaining drops of blood and had licked the bowl clean. When he came purring up to her as she worked at the blood spots on the couch and carpet, she pushed him away.

Refusing to be insulted by a mere human, he calmly licked his fur and then spitefully curled up next to Vachon.

Three

Whatever thoughts she had about being unable to sleep without her drapes closed vanished amidst the other thoughts that kept her awake . . .

Nick was gone.

That was one thought that always refused to let her rest, and now that she had almost managed to push it from her life, Vachon had brought it back with a vengeance.

She had almost convinced herself, for the sake of her own sanity, that she had never known Nick, or at least, not known him in a way that was different from how everyone else had.

No one spoke to her of him at work, half of them thinking the memory of him would be too painful to her, the other half all but convinced that he had been the one who had attacked her so brutally. She had claimed that Nick had been attacked, too, but no one believed that. They found no blood at the crime scene other than a very small amount of hers, and even if they had found Nick's blood, it wouldn't have matched his fabricated medical records.

He'd done a lot of backsliding in the last few weeks they were together. The relationship between them had been unraveling for some time, which made the way things ended hurt even worse.

She had the dimmest memory that LaCroix had been there at some point, in the last moments she had spent with Nick, standing over Nick with something in his hands. Anything that had happened beyond that point was still deeply buried in her subconscious. She'd discontinued her post-trauma therapy sessions as soon as those memories had begun to surface.

Her therapist had strongly advised against that, but if LaCroix had killed Nick—(did she remember Nick asking him to, or was that a dream?)—she wasn't ready to know that. She probably never would be.

Nick was a cop. They had been friends. He'd disappeared. She was getting over it. There were no more vampires in Natalie Lambert's world anymore, and that was fine with her.

Then, tonight, it had started all over again.

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When she was startled awake, it surprised her that she had fallen asleep at all. She'd been thinking of Nick again. Dreaming about him. His cold lips on her neck . . .

But it wasn't that familiar nightmare that had awakened her. She fought back panic when she realized she wasn't alone in her apartment, until the events of the few hours before quickly came back to her.

The hospital . . . Vachon . . .

Then she knew what had awakened her. He was in the

bathroom throwing up.

Great, she thought, and for a moment considered not dealing with it and going back to sleep. He was a big boy, he could take care of himself.

But he cried out in pain, and it took a lot to make Them hurt, she knew that. She threw off her covers and went to him.

He was doubled up on the floor, his eyes gold, his fangs partially extended. He looked right at her, which should have frightened her, but she saw no threat in his eyes, only agony.

She knelt beside him. "What is it, Vachon? What's the matter?"

He squeezed his eyes shut as if that would stop the pain. "It hurts . . . like before . . ."

When he'd been in such torment that he had begged to die?

She was close enough to the toilet to see that he'd vomited a large quantity of blood. Just blood. Vampires didn't secrete the many digestive juices that gave vomit its characteristically wretched odor, and for that she was grateful.

She'd examined Nick extensively enough to know that most of Their internal organs didn't function the same way a human's did. She had no idea what the source of pain like this could be.

She pushed his hair back out of his face. "Vachon, I don't know what's wrong. I don't know what to do for you . . ."

But she couldn't just let him hurt. She found the department issue paramedic kit she had been authorized as an M.D. There was morphine in it. Even it if didn't help, it wouldn't harm him.

He was quiet by the time she got back to him. Ominously so.

He had stretched out on the floor, his entire body strangely rigid. Even though he was a vampire, and such things were not supposed to happen to Them, it took her only seconds to realize that he was having a seizure.

She quickly turned him on his side in case he threw up again. There were no violent convulsions, so she didn't need to worry about him injuring himself on the hard tile. All she could do was support his head until the tonic contractions stopped.

When they finally abated, he blinked a couple of times but she saw no sign of awareness in his eyes. She pushed his dirty hair out of his face again and found that his forehead was very warm. He was too warm even for a mortal.

She hunted through the medicine cabinet until she found her digital thermometer. She managed to get him to put it in his mouth, ready to pull it out at the first sign that he might try to bite it off.

Nick's basal body temperature had been around eighty-eight degrees. When the thermometer's alarm sounded, she discovered Vachon's was almost twelve degrees above that. A similar rise in body temperature in a human would prove fatal in minutes.

She knew They could get sick enough to die. She'd seen it happen.

She filled the sink with lukewarm water and used it to sponge him off and try to get the fever down.

As the dirt came off, she saw that there were deep scratches on his face and neck that began to bleed when she wiped the washcloth over them. They couldn't be recent—they were caked with mud. Even if he'd gotten them right before he'd been taken to the hospital, they should have healed and disappeared by then. But they bled like fresh wounds, and continued to bleed for several minutes.

Seeing that, she was careful to avoid the angry red indentation on his chest. The jagged edges of the wound appeared to be healing inward, but the opening itself was covered only by a layer of skin so thin it looked like it would rupture with the slightest pressure.

His heart chose the moment she was examining the wound to contract in one of its six-times-per-hour beats, and she actually saw it pulse directly beneath the fragile skin.

He responded to the cooling water and began to look better in a few minutes. His skin was still not vampire-cold to the touch, but his temperature gradually lowered until he was mortal-cool again. Removing some of the dirt hadn't hurt, either.

He looked up at her, confused, but aware.

"What happened?"

"You had some kind of seizure. Has that happened to you before?"

"No, of course not." He sounded surprised she'd even ask. No matter what, Natalie thought irritably, They still thought they were so damned indestructible.

He struggled to sit up, but then shut his eyes and took a deep breath. "I feel sick again."

He wasn't kidding. He threw up until there couldn't possibly be anything left in him.

Even so, when it was over, he didn't appear to be in pain any longer.

He literally crawled back into the living room and huddled under his blanket, shivering.

Then he asked Natalie for more blood.

She fed him another bag before he finally went back to sleep, leaving her to worry about where she was going to get more for him when he needed it.

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It was two in the afternoon by this time, and she figured it would be pointless to try to go back to bed even though she was exhausted.

She showered and then sat in front of her bedroom mirror untangling her thick, curly, wet hair.

She'd have to go in to work that night. She'd used up all of her sick leave and then some after the Assault.

Besides, she was still wondering where she was going find a source of blood for Vachon. She'd have to experiment with some possible ways she'd come up with to drain a cadaver . . .

You're a ghoul, Natalie Lambert. The thought was full of hostility. *That's all that knowing Them has done for you, turned you into some kind of cartoon mad scientist.*

More blood. You have to get it for him.

Damn Them all, anyway! She threw her hairbrush at the wall, and narrowly missed an unsuspecting Sidney, who fled in terror.

She had never been one to cry easily before . . . before what happened with Nick. But now she sometimes found herself doing it for no apparent reason. Right then, she was doing it because she was . . . What? Angry? Worried? Frustrated? She didn't know. She just cried.

Vachon didn't wake up, and Sidney stared at her, his green eyes little slits of resentment. Seeing that she'd get no sympathy from either of them eventually calmed her down.

She walked over to pet Sidney, to cuddle him, but he stalked away in a huff and curled up beside Vachon once again.

She knelt beside him and stroked his fur, anyway, until he forgave her and began to purr. She took him in her arms and lay down on the couch. She knew that falling asleep with her head soaking wet would no doubt cause the dreaded Velcro Hair, but she was too weary to care.

She fell asleep dreaming of Nick. His cold kisses, his cold hand in hers.

If she never wanted to see him again, why did it hurt so much that he was gone?

❑❑❑❑❑

Her subconscious mind was trying to tell her she should be thinking of waking up when she was jarred out of sleep the same way she had been the first time.

This time, Vachon was screaming with the pain.

Maybe it was a good thing, maybe it was a bad thing, but since the Assault, she didn't fear death. Whether it was because she had come so close, or because she had lived for Nick and now he was gone, she didn't know. But despite her fear that he might hurt her, when she found Vachon on her bathroom floor, she approached him anyway and took him into her arms.

She tried to reassure him by reminding him that the pain had passed the last time, but asked him if he wanted her to give him the morphine, anyway.

"Just make it stop. I can't stand it."

Minutes after she injected the drug, he threw up again. Whether it was the morphine or something that would have happened anyway, Natalie wasn't certain, but she had a bad feeling about it.

Blood was the only thing he could eat, and if he couldn't keep that down, where were they going to go from there?

At least the pain subsided as soon as he'd gotten rid of the blood in his stomach, although he was feverish again.

"You're pretty sick," she told him. "Do you have any idea what's causing this?"

He fingered the angry, oozing scratches on his neck. "She scratched me . . . that little girl. Only she wasn't a little girl. She was so strong . . . so evil . . ."

"Divia?"

"Was that her name? I didn't know . . . But she hurt me, somehow . . . It made me hurt like this . . . before . . ."

"You could have come to me for help."

He shook his head. "I couldn't think. I was seeing things . . . awful things. They wouldn't stop. I asked Tracy to end it. That was all I could think of. I just wanted it to be over. I thought I was dying anyway." He sighed. "Maybe I still am."

"No!" she told him sternly. "No, you aren't."

The morphine was making him sleepy and Natalie thought she'd better get him back to the living room before she had to leave him on the cold, hard floor.

"I'm going to need to run some tests, to see if I can find out what's wrong." she told him as she tucked the blanket around him. "I'll need some blood, some tissue samples . . ." She felt a lump rise in her throat. How many times had she said those same words to Nick?

"Okay," Vachon sighed agreeably.

What she hoped to accomplish she didn't know. She'd already failed miserably with one vampire.

And she had to admit to herself that her motives were not entirely altruistic.

She really didn't want another one of Them in her life, and if she had to find some secret potion to get Vachon back on his feet and out the door, the sooner the better. She'd had enough of the cold-blooded little bastards . . .

Of course, Vachon would pick that very moment to look up at her with his large, expressive eyes.

Another vampire—this one completely helpless—trusting her to ease his pain.

She smoothed his dirty tangled hair, touching him the same way she had wanted to do so many times with Nick. "You'll be okay," she promised.

Four

It was amazing how much blood you could drain out of a body bag, if it had a freshly mutilated human inside it. This one was a gunshot wound to the chest. The blood had stopped flowing out of him when his heart had stopped beating, which, from the looks of the hole in him, had been instantly. But it had continued to obey the law of all liquid and drain to the lowest point—where it had flowed out the gaping wound in John Doe's back and into the body bag.

Natalie emptied a 2-liter bottle of Diet Coke appropriated from the fridge in the employee lounge, rinsed it, and filled it with the run-off from her examining table. She even thought to strain it. Couldn't have Vachon's tender tummy accidentally ingesting a piece of raw meat . . .

You're as much a monster as he is, she thought.

She put the bottle in the specimen cooler.

Grace was running a tox screen on the samples she'd taken from Vachon. Some skin cells, a lock of hair. There wasn't much blood to work with. He was so dehydrated that even after she'd stuck him a dozen times, she'd ended up actually stabbing him with an Exacto knife just to get a few precious drops. He'd patiently endured the discomfort, as Nick had done.

Maybe for Vachon, it would pay off.

The shift had dragged by. She had been very specific about asking Grace what to look for—she didn't want her happening by accident upon the fact that the blood she was working with came from a source not exactly human. Even so, she worried Grace might find something too weird in the samples, so she hadn't had her perform any tests that would involve her using a microscope.

She also worried someone would discover her tapping blood from a corpse.

And, she had no idea what Vachon was doing while in her apartment. She'd left the phone with him, along with her number, in case he needed anything, but he hadn't called. She had called him and had let it ring a dozen times before she remembered that she'd ordered him not to answer the phone. She couldn't take a chance on anyone finding out he was there. It was not her reputation she was concerned about—God knew that had suffered all it could from the gossip about her and Nick that had circulated after the Assault. But she knew about the Enforcers, and she didn't know if they knew about Vachon.

Still, she wished she'd thought to specify a time for him to call her. For all she knew, he could have spiked another horrifying fever and died. Or, he could have suddenly recovered and was at that very moment roaming the streets of Toronto on a killing rampage, making up for lost time . . .

She looked at the clock. An hour and forty minutes to go.

Grace came in looking perplexed. "Where did you get those samples you gave me?" she asked.

Natalie Lambert, Expert Liar, already had an answer for that. "It's just something I'm working on for the museum. Why? Did you find anything unusual?"

"You could say that . . ." She showed Natalie her preliminary test results. "There are levels of some unknown toxin that are off the scale . . . This here--" She indicated a specific area on her diagram. "The book says this signature is a component of nerve gas, but the compound yielding that result has more characteristics of an organic origin . . ."

Natalie appeared only mildly interested. "Maybe some bizarre ritual embalming technique?"

"I doubt it. It's too diffused through the tissues. I'd say more likely it was the cause of death, perhaps the venom of some animal or insect. But, it should have killed instantly. I don't understand how this person lived long enough for it to be metabolized to the extent it was."

Natalie pretended to be too interested in what she was doing to give Grace's report her full attention. "Just leave it on my desk. Let me know when you have the full study completed."

Grace was disappointed. She liked the mysterious, interesting cases, and Natalie had liked them, too, once upon a time. But since the Assault—since losing Nick Knight—she had changed. Now, she only went through the motions, got through the day. It was a sad thing to see.

As soon as Grace was gone, Natalie snatched the report off her desk. Of course, these results were only superficial, but they spoke volumes. Vachon's system was saturated with some sort of extremely potent neurotoxin. Except for the fact that it was twenty times more efficient, and had the capacity to regenerate, a vampire's nervous system functioned almost identically to that of a human. Who knew what this was doing to him?

❑❑❑❑❑

Sidney came running as usual when she opened the door to her apartment, but she had to search for Vachon. She found him curled up on the bathroom floor again. He looked like he'd been there all night, and somewhere along the way, he'd hurt himself. There was an large, ugly bruise on his forehead and a deep gash under one eye.

She knelt down and turned his face to examine it. "How did you get hurt?"

He shrugged.

She fingered the bruise gently. "There's no way you can not know how you did this," she said sternly. "Did you have another seizure?"

He didn't like that question. "Three or four of them, if you must know."

"What are you doing in here, anyway? Were you sick again?"

"No. The floor is cool. I'm hot."

Funny how those last two little words, "I'm hot," made her heart suddenly ache. She remembered Nick saying them, afraid he was dying, yet mystified that a disease—any disease—would have the audacity to infect his kind. The work she had done with him had saved him from getting as sick as some of the others—some of the ones who had died. He'd never thought to thank her for that, had he? Was that when he had begun to wonder if he really wanted to be mortal? When he had looked death-by-escaped-laboratory-virus in the face, and seen it for what it was? Not just the end of The Vampire, but the end, period? Had he decided that wasn't what he wanted after all, and had he just been too afraid she'd be disappointed in him to tell her the truth?

Nick is not here. He's not the problem right now. Don't think about him . . .

She felt Vachon's forehead. Barely lukewarm, but by vampire standards, he was burning up.

She reached over him and turned on the bathtub faucets, then knelt down and started removing his boots. They felt like they were molded to him, and once she managed to peel them off she threw them in the trash along with his socks. He didn't do anything to stop her until she unbuckled his belt and reached for the button on his jeans.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm getting you out of these filthy clothes, first of all, and then I hope to somehow get the rest of this dirt off of you and get your temperature down in the process."

He pushed her hand away, or tried to. "Uh-uh. No."

She grabbed his wrists and held his hands out of her way. "How about that? I'm stronger than you are. I'll bet that's a new experience for you."

She pulled the zipper down and slid his jeans off. There was no underwear to bother with.

Vachon was embarrassed, but he made no attempt to cover himself, and Natalie got the idea it was because he wanted her to be embarrassed, too.

"You forget, I see naked men every day," she told him.

"Are any of them ever alive?"

That remark stung a bit, as she was sure he meant for it to, but rather than being offended, she was amused at his temerity considering the circumstances.

"Get in the tub," she ordered him.

He looked as though he considered refusing this request, but he didn't.

She had to steady him to keep him from going into the water head-first. If anything, he was even weaker than he had been the night before. She wondered if he could even walk anymore.

"Have you had anything to eat?"

"No."

She was about to ask why when she mentally kicked herself for being so stupid. She'd forgotten he couldn't feed himself.

"I'm sorry about that. I'll get you something when we're done here."

"I don't want to eat. It makes me sick."

"Well, you're going to have to try. I've got some fresh stuff for you."

He looked up at her. Surprise, gratitude, she couldn't tell which.

She removed the band-aid on the inside of his left biceps which covered the wound she'd made with the Exacto knife. The cut was still there, still open, surrounded by a small ring of inflammation. She was glad she'd sterilized the knife as a precaution. He wasn't healing like a vampire anymore.

His hands were dirtier than the rest of him. *The digging,* she thought. She rubbed vigorously at them with a soft nail brush and the dirt came off eventually.

His hands were beautiful—flawless skin, long, graceful fingers and nails that looked like glass. Nick's hands had been like that, too, the few times he'd let her hold them. She'd never really had a chance to just look at them and enjoy it. She always had to have some excuse, or he'd pull away, afraid of the contact, the hint of affection.

If any of that bothered Vachon, she saw no indication of it. He shut his eyes and let the cool water soothe his feverish body while Natalie scrubbed and rinsed and scrubbed some more.

As she worked the lather across his bare back, she felt an unexpected pang of resentment. It took her by surprise, because there was no reason for her to resent Vachon. He hadn't done this terrible thing—whatever it was—to himself, and he certainly hadn't asked her to give him a bath. It saddened her when she realized that what bothered her was the fact that she had never done anything even remotely this intimate with Nick . . .

She had never seen Nick naked, never felt his muscles under his cool, pale, bare skin. She had never even really touched him except with a stethoscope, or through his shirt, or in the most formal of friendly ways.

She noticed Vachon had two small, deep scars on his back, and others elsewhere on his body. Nick had told her vampires didn't get new scars, but kept the ones from their mortal life. Did Nick have scars? He'd been a solder—she was sure he must have had some. Vachon wasn't circumcised, and it was safe to assume that Nick probably hadn't been either, but she honestly didn't have any idea. How would she? It certainly wasn't something she'd ever asked him about.

It was humiliating to think that she had been willing to risk her life to make love to Nick, but that she now knew Vachon's body better than she had his . . .

His hair was so thick she used half a bottle of shampoo before she was satisfied she'd gotten all of the dirt out of it. By then the water in the tub was black. She drained it out and turned on the shower. Vachon's skin felt cool to the touch once again, the fever gone for now, and she figured he could manage to hold his head under the spray and finish the job of getting the soap out of his hair and rinsing himself off.

She looked inside his jeans for some hint of what size they were and then thought maybe she had a pair of sweatpants that would fit him. She found them and one of her baggy sweatshirts.

She dried him off and dressed him and he hated every minute of it. She didn't blame him. She remembered lying weak and helpless in the hospital while the nurses took care of her most personal needs, and how humiliating that had felt.

The pants were too short. She snipped the elastic at the bottom so they wouldn't be uncomfortable. She'd have to go shopping for him. Something else she had only fantasized about doing for Nick.

He managed the distance to the living room where he dropped face-down on the couch.

"Is it okay if I sleep here?" He asked it as though he thought he'd already asked enough of her.

"Of course it's okay," she told him. "It has to be more comfortable than the floor."

She looked through her cabinets until she found a big insulated mug emblazoned with the name of the gas station that sold them with unlimited coffee or soda refills. It was light and had a handle big enough for Vachon's hand to fit through. She filled it from the Coke bottle and then rummaged through her junk drawer for some straws left over from dozens of fast-food and take-out meals. She hoped he'd be able to hold the mug himself and drink through the straw. She doubted his ego would allow her to feed him again.

She propped some pillows behind him and hooked the mug over his paralyzed fingers. He needed both hands to steady it, but the idea worked once he figured out how to use the straws. She left him alone and got herself something to eat while he sipped at it. When she returned with her microwave dinner, he'd almost finished.

"My compliments to the donor," he told her.

"I'll tell him you liked it . . . Do you want more?"

"I don't think I better."

"Vachon, you have to eat. You've got to be hungry."

"I know I should be," he told her, and looked at the blood that remained. "We usually want it all the time, even when we've just had it."

"The preliminary toxicology report shows you were poisoned. How did Divia do that to you?"

This time when he shrugged, he really didn't know the answer. "She didn't give me anything . . . I didn't drink from her." He fingered the gashes on his neck, which were still raw and wet-looking. She'd have to bandage them so his clothing didn't stick.

"Well, it's an organic poison, similar to some kind of venom. It's affecting your nervous system."

"Oh."

Natalie was expecting him to say a little more than that. She could see that he wanted to. "Vachon?"

He broke eye contact with her before he spoke. "When I crawled out of the ground, I couldn't see or hear, not anything. Some of it came back, but it's not what it was. I don't think it's even what it was when I was mortal . . ." He looked at her again. "Will I stay this way?"

She told him the truth. "I don't know. It depends on the nature and extent of the damage, and whether your ability to heal has been compromised as well."

She could tell by the look on his face that she had been too honest with him, too blunt.

"I'm still a vampire, Natalie," he said softly. "I can feel that I am. But if I can't . . ." He couldn't bring himself to say it.

If he wasn't human, yet no longer had the abilities needed to survive as a vampire, what was that going to make him? Natalie couldn't give him any kind of an answer to that. She couldn't even promise that she'd keep him safe, even though at that moment she wanted to.

She took the empty mug from him. "It's almost sunrise. Try to rest, and we'll worry about the rest of it later, okay?"

But she worried about it then. She fell asleep worrying about it, and when she was awakened by him rejecting the blood once again, she worried about it even more. She wished Nick was there for her. At that point, even LaCroix would do. Any one of Them who could give her some idea of what she could do to help him. Otherwise, he was going to starve right before her eyes.

Not die, just starve. Waste away until he was a thing that had no life yet was not dead.

"I hate this," he said, once the worst was over and he could talk again.

Morphine dulled his pain at least, so she didn't have to listen to him scream. "Nobody likes throwing up."

"I was never this sick when I was human."

"If you'd met up with Divia when you were human, you would have been dead before you could have taken a second breath."

"Well, right now I can't say I'm happy to be alive."

Natalie resisted an urge to blurt out something sarcastic. Something about his friend Urs, who might have recovered just as he had, and then unwittingly wandered off into the sunlight instead of ending up with someone who would help her. Something about Tracy Vetter, whose mortal body never had a chance against the bullets that had ripped through her vital organs. Something about Nick . . . was he happy to be alive—*if* he was alive—knowing he had almost killed her? Or maybe thinking that he *had* killed her?

But she held her tongue. Vachon was miserably sick—the least she could do was let him feel sorry for himself.

He frowned as an unpleasant thought occurred to him. "Do you think she'll be back?"

"Divia?"

He nodded.

Natalie shook her head. "No, Vachon. Nick staked her, and LaCroix burned her. She's dead."

They're all dead, she wanted to tell him. But then wasn't the time for that.

Five

Unable to sleep, Natalie had gone shopping.

She had stopped at her favorite ask-no-questions medical supply dealer and put blood collection equipment, IV supplies, broad-spectrum antibiotics, saline, and glucose on her credit card. They remembered her from her last research project—Nick.

She then stopped at the mall and bought Vachon some clothes. A pair of jeans, a couple of T-shirts, socks. All black. Even if he liked other colors, he would still like black. Nick had never been able to explain why, but all of Them liked it. She thought about replacing his boots until she saw how expensive they were. How the hell had he been able to afford them when he didn't have a job? And the leather jacket? Two-fifty at least. Maybe he'd stolen them. Who knew? She found that buying the clothes for him helped her think optimistically. Maybe he'd get well enough to need them.

She got to work forty-five minutes early, and it was a lucky thing she did. It gave her first crack at one Mr. Warren Thornton. He'd been found dead in the weight room of a posh local health club, an apparent heart attack, but an autopsy was required to rule out foul play even though none was suspected.

He had just been brought in. His blood hadn't completely clotted in his veins yet . . .

Natalie tilted the examination table so Mr. Thornton's head was lower than the rest of him. She then used her newly purchased medical supplies to open his jugular vein and carotid artery and began the process of siphoning every available drop of blood out of him. She still had one of the units from the hospital and a liter and a half in the Coke bottle, but from here on out, she was going to have to get it whenever and wherever she could.

Until Vachon could hunt for himself . . .

She was making a big assumption at that point that Vachon wouldn't simply die on her. She had no idea how much longer his body could go without nourishment before the poison in him overwhelmed his system completely. Maybe hours, maybe forever.

She would have liked nothing better than to admit him to a hospital and run every test in the book on him, but there was no way that was going to happen. Grace was suspicious enough without dragging in an entire medical team.

"Natalie, what are you doing?"

Natalie jumped.

Speak of the devil . . . Grace had appeared behind her. She hadn't even heard her come in. Grace could be as bad as Nick in that respect.

"What? Oh, hi, Grace."

"Why are you collecting that man's blood?"

"Well, I, uh . . . have a new theory I want to check out."

Grace gave her a questioning look. "This hasn't got anything to do with all those experiments you were doing on Detective Knight, does it?"

Natalie looked stricken.

Grace put an arm around her. "I know, I know. It hurts just to hear his name. But, Natalie, you haven't been the same person since he disappeared. I'm worried about you. Now this . . ." She waved a hand at the corpse. "I don't understand."

If her relationship with Nick had taught her anything, it was how to think fast.

"Grace, you're my friend. Can I trust you?"

"Of course you can."

"It's a relative of Nick's. He's come to me for help. He suffers from the same genetic disorder . . ."

"Does he know where Nick is?"

Natalie shook her head sadly. "No. And I'm afraid he's very ill. He is much more seriously affected than Nick. Even the special diet isn't working. Everyone else has given up on him. Nick apparently mentioned our work once, and he got here somehow. I'm afraid now I'm his only hope."

Natalie congratulated herself. *None* of that was a total lie. Not really.

"Those toxicology studies you've had me working on . . . They're not . . ."

Natalie nodded. "They're his. So you know how sick he is."

"Sick!? I don't know why he's not dead."

"I don't either. His condition is far more advanced than Nick's was."

"Can I help?"

"Grace, you already have. And I know I should have confided in you before. But you see why I have to be quiet about this. I don't have the authority to be conducting independent biomedical research, particularly not in a public facility. But I can't take a chance on this work being interrupted."

Good. Still no lies.

"Nobody will find out from me . . . Besides, it's good to see you interested in something again."

That comment took Natalie by surprise, especially when she realized it was true. She had not cared about anything since the Assault. She hadn't even managed to interest herself in looking for Nick. Deep down, she was afraid of what answers such a search might reveal.

Vachon's intrusion on her life had been both unwelcome and unwanted, of that there was no doubt, but worrying about what she was going to do with a disabled vampire under her roof had, she admitted, gotten her mind off of Nick and put it on something other than her own misery.

"You had better let me test a sample of that for HIV before you handle it," Grace nodded at the near-full bags of blood.

Natalie supposed that for her own safety, Grace was right.

Grace was an extremely intelligent woman. It was possible she hadn't bought a single word of Natalie's explanation. Natalie loved the woman for not asking any more questions.

After she left, Natalie opened up the locked drawer at the bottom of her desk. It was filled with notebooks, a journal of the work she had done with Nick. She had the information on computer disks, too, but had found that if she was unexpectedly interrupted, it was much easier to cover up something on your desk than on a CRT screen. Besides, Nick could get into her computer, but he couldn't access the drawer without breaking the lock. Some of her more personal observations were pen-and-ink only.

She tried to glance over the notes quickly. They brought back too many memories she still couldn't deal with, and right then, she wanted information, not to be reminded of Nick Knight.

She found what she was looking for. The most thorough—probably the only—complete blood chemistry study ever done on a vampire. Electrolytes, blood sugar, cell counts—everything she needed to know what constituted "normal" vampire blood.

Vampires metabolized the blood they fed on by changing the actual DNA structure until it became their own vampire blood, but their bodies did not replenish it. Although their bone marrow contained blood cells, they were not produced there. As far as she could tell, those sites became the source of those unique vampire antibodies once They were brought across. But, she only had one sample to work with. Nick had very definitely not enjoyed it when she had taken bone marrow from him, and he'd never let her do it again.

Eventually, if a vampire's blood was not replaced by ingestion, it became used up, nothing but a muck of dead cells and potent vampire antibodies that would begin attacking the host if not held in check by a fresh infusion. That was what caused them to experience sudden, severe pain if they went too long without feeding.

It had been months since Vachon had fed as he should have, and there was very little actual blood left in him. His body was nowhere near any of the proper levels of anything.

She examined a slide of his blood and noticed a few strange-looking blood cells, which she dismissed as the result of the decaying process. What was most striking was that it contained only a minute fraction of the antibodies that should have been there. That was good news because it meant they weren't about to turn on him and eat him alive. The bad news was, he probably now had less healing capacity and disease resistance than an ordinary mortal. The poison had devastated his immune system, and without blood to nourish the tissues that produced the antibodies, that would not change.

She found the last notebook in which she had entered comments about Nick. She skipped those, too. Things had taken a turn for the worse the last few months they were together. He had gone back to drinking human blood, for one thing. She didn't want to remember any of it.

On the first blank page, she began new entries.

❑❑❑❑❑

Natalie noticed something different the minute she walked through the door, but didn't know what it was until she looked

at Vachon, still on her couch, with Sidney curled up on top of him.

The tabby hadn't rushed to greet her as he usually did.

"So—" she stroked his fur— "now you think you're too special to say 'hi' to me."

Vachon opened his eyes. "Hi."

Natalie laughed. *How long had it been since she had done that?* "I was talking to Sidney. He seems to like you."

"Sometimes animals don't." He placed a hand on the cat. "Dogs, they like anybody. But cats know . . . about the vampire. Some are afraid. They usually don't like it that we feel cold, either."

She felt his forehead. His skin was anything but cold. She checked under the bandage she'd put on the scratches on his neck. They showed early signs of infection.

She frowned, and he noticed.

"I know. They aren't healing."

"Do they hurt?" Severe pain could mean the infection was spreading below the surface of the skin.

"Some. Not too bad."

He was almost too tall to stretch out on her couch. "I think you'd be more comfortable in a bed. Think you can make it to the bedroom?"

He shook his head. "I can't walk anymore."

She nudged Sidney off of him. "C'mon. I'll help you."

She did most of the work. It would have been much simpler if she had been strong enough to carry him.

Once she had him sitting on the bed, she asked him to perform some simple movements for her. She was certainly no expert at neurological assessment, but it wasn't hard to see why he was having such difficulty. Instead of traveling in a direct path, the signals from his brain to his body seemed to be going wherever they wanted to, which made it almost impossible for him to selectively contract or relax specific muscles. If he tried to flex an arm, the muscles that extended it would fire at the same time. Some muscles were spastic and others completely flaccid. He was generally so weak that he could barely sit up. When she saw the examination was upsetting him, she stopped.

"Are you too hot in this shirt?" She tugged at the heavy sweatshirt. He didn't need to be any warmer than he was.

"I couldn't get it off."

She pulled the shirt over his head. "Someone really should be here with you while I'm at work."

"NO!" he snapped. "Nobody can know."

"Know what?"

"That I'm . . . like this."

This has to be hell for him . . .

She touched his hair. She loved the feel of it, and wondered how Nick's would have felt if he'd let it get as long as Vachon's. "It's okay. No one will know."

The ugly stake wound still stood out on his chest. At some point in time, it had begun to heal and then stopped. Probably when his supply of antibodies had dropped to an ineffective level. But the scratches were older than the wound. Why had they not healed at all? The only answer she could come up with was that the scratches were the site where Divia's poison was introduced into his body. It was most concentrated at that point, and the antibodies were useless against it.

She didn't tell him any of this. It wasn't something he needed to hear right then.

Six

Clearly, being poisoned had made him unable to eat, but at what point had that occurred? And she had nagging questions about why he had apparently suffered horrifying hallucinations immediately after the attack which had now subsided. What would happen if his blood were restored?

She guessed she would find out, because she intended to get some blood into him any way she could.

"Vachon, were you able to feed *after* Divia attacked you? Do you remember?"

"I don't know. I didn't really want to feed . . ." He looked away, embarrassed. "I just wanted to kill. I was crazy. I attacked Urs. I wanted to kill Tracy. But I don't even remember being hungry."

That hinted that his inability to eat might be part of a vicious cycle. The fact that he had healed in the beginning indicated his blood could counteract the poison, but the poison made him unable to eat and replenish his blood. He rejected everything an hour or so after he drank which led Natalie to suspect that the toxins in his body were affecting him in a way similar to the effect chemotherapy drugs had on cancer patients. It wasn't the food or even his stomach that was the problem, but an abnormal neurological response of some kind.

He didn't like the idea when she produced the equipment and told him that she planned to try giving him blood intravenously.

"It won't hurt." *Not a lot, anyway.*

"Yes, it will. I don't like needles."

"Nobody likes needles, Vachon. Deal with it, or you're going to starve."

She checked his hands, his arms, his feet, looking for a suitable vein—but he was so dehydrated she wasn't able to find one near the surface. That left her with the choice of either cutting down to find an acceptable site, or using the large blood vessels on his neck. The latter was risky in a human, because the blood came gushing out with considerable force once they were penetrated.

But vampires had no blood pressure to speak of, no steady heartbeat, and Vachon had hardly any blood left in him, anyway.

She pushed his head to the side and swabbed his neck with alcohol. Ordinarily, that wouldn't have been necessary, but his immune system was clearly not doing its job the way it was supposed to, and she had no idea how susceptible he was to infection.

"Hold still," she told him. "I only want to have to do this once."

The way in which he languidly stretched his neck so that

she had easy access to every inch of it should have told her something, but maybe Vachon wasn't even aware of the implications at the time.

"You ready?"

He nodded yes, and she quickly slipped the needle into his jugular vein. A tiny trickle of blood formed at the site, but was instantly sucked back into the wound. Quickly, she taped it down and started the blood flowing at maximum rate.

Vachon moaned and shut his eyes.

"Are you okay?" she asked him. Personally, she'd have to seriously consider fainting if someone stuck a needle in her neck.

He nodded. "Yeah, I . . . uhh . . ." He took a deep breath and rolled over so he wasn't facing her.

His body tensed, and he buried his face in the pillow and made a sound somewhere between a gasp and a groan.

Natalie was perplexed. He didn't sound like he was in pain, or look as though he were experiencing another seizure.

She spoke his name, but he didn't answer her, and she began to wonder what fluke of vampire anatomy she had failed to consider this time, when the answer hit her like a slap on the forehead.

She felt the blood rising first into her cheeks, then her entire face.

A puncture wound to the neck was the vampire equivalent of copulation.

And she had been with enough men to know exactly what was wrong with Vachon—or rather, what wasn't wrong with him.

She had no idea what he was thinking, if in fact he was even capable of thought at that point, but she was so embarrassed she wanted to disappear.

He drained the bag quickly, but not so fast that she didn't have time to compose herself and reassume her professional demeanor. During that time, she couldn't help but wonder if she hadn't just inadvertently expanded the horizons of kinky vampire sex.

Vachon's entire body quivered when she pulled the needle out.

He kept his head in the pillow. Maybe he hadn't realized what would happen any more than she had.

"Are you okay, Vachon?" she asked, in the most matter-of-fact tone she could manage.

"Oh, yeah."

Was he grinning? She was going to smack the little shit if he was!

But when he finally turned and looked at her, there was more color in his face than she had ever seen on a vampire. Maybe it was the fresh infusion of blood, but he really did look like he was blushing.

"I didn't know that would happen," he told her. Even so, there was a grin creeping into his expression, she could see it!

She decided her least humiliating option would be to avoid discussing it altogether, but he had different ideas.

He touched the little puncture wound carefully. "The blood always leaves through here . . . I never felt it coming into me that way . . . It was . . . nice."

Natalie fumbled with the equipment. "Well, I'm glad one of us enjoyed it. How do you feel?"

He gave her a you-should-know look and she definitely wanted to smack him one. If any more blood ran up into her head, her face was going to explode.

"We'll wait a couple of hours and see what happens before I give you any more." *This time, preferably, via some other location.*

He rolled over onto his stomach. It was difficult for him, and looked like it hurt.

"Are you in pain?" Natalie asked him, gently putting her hand on his bare back.

"Everything hurts," he muttered. "It doesn't go away."

She rubbed his back gently, which he seemed to appreciate.

"Natalie?"

"Hm?"

"I want Tracy to know I'm alive. I don't know how to tell her . . ."

Natalie felt a ball of ice form in the pit of her stomach. She wasn't prepared to tell him the truth. Not yet. But it would be cruel to lie to him.

"We can talk about that later," she said.

He accepted that, and was quiet for a few moments.

"I don't feel Urs anymore," he said softly. "I told her to leave, but I don't think she did. I'd still feel her . . . Did Divia kill her?"

"I think so," Natalie told him. "She was hurt much worse than you were. I saw her body. I don't think she was able to come back, like you did."

"She was never happy about . . . what I did to her. Maybe now she knows why I had to."

"Why did you have to?" Natalie had to know the answer to that. Had to hear it from a vampire. Had to know why Nick *didn't* have to, why he had chosen not to bring her across. (Did she really believe that's what he'd done?)

But Vachon's reply was disappointingly simple. "She was so beautiful. I couldn't let her die."

"There had to have been others just like her, Vachon. Don't tell me you brought them all across."

"No. Just Urs. Her blood told me things. That all she wanted was to be loved, protected. She didn't think that was possible for her, but she wanted it so much she didn't want to live if she couldn't have it. I thought I could give her that, but it turned out she didn't want it from *me*, not from a vampire."

That had hurt him. Natalie heard it in his voice. He had loved his Urs, in the only way he was able to—as a vampire. But no matter how great that love had been, it had not been enough, had not been what she had needed or wanted.

"Yeah, I think I know how that feels," she sighed. This conversation was hitting much too close to home. She pulled the sheet up over him. "Rest now. If you're okay in two hours, we'll give you some more fluids, and then some antibiotics."

She remembered the window, and went to get more garbage bags and duct tape. She wondered what on earth her neighbors must be thinking seeing that now every window in the apartment was blacked out. Hell, let 'em wonder. If they asked, she'd tell them she had a house guest who was a vampire. Like anybody would believe that.

When she returned, she saw that Sidney was licking the drops of blood that had drained from the IV tubing. If he could

have stuck his tongue up into the bag, he would have.

"Bad kitty!" she hissed at him.

He hissed back, turned his tail up at her, and folded himself up on Vachon's back.

❑❑❑❑❑

It was fortunate she didn't have to go in to work that night. She had taken her alarm clock into the living room and set it to wake her up every three hours during the day, but she'd hardly slept in between, waiting for Vachon to exhibit some violent reaction to whatever she had last pumped into him. Luckily, that didn't happen, not with the saline or the glucose or even the antibiotics. She'd also given him another liter of whole blood.

Now, after just twelve hours, the improvement was noticeable. His temperature had dropped to just one or two degrees above vampire-normal almost immediately and had stayed there. The inflammation had begun to disappear from the scratches, the incision she'd made in his arm, and the cut under his eye. They still weren't healing like they should have been, but it was a start.

Despite her embarrassment, she'd been forced to use his neck repeatedly, and had discovered, much to her relief, that it was only the blood that aroused him, although she knew he actually got an erotic thrill out of having that needle stuck in him. Well, might as well let him enjoy something, she figured.

After the fifth transfusion, other blood vessels became detectable, but she decided to stop for awhile. She'd given him almost two gallons during the course of the day, and she didn't know how much he could handle. She had never established with Nick how or if They got rid of excess fluid in their bodies. Their kidneys didn't appear to function, but that didn't mean they couldn't. Other organs performed when there was something for them to do; secreting hormones, metabolizing drugs or alcohol, manufacturing new cells. But for all she knew, she could accidentally drown Vachon by giving him too many fluids at once. It probably wouldn't kill him, but pulmonary edema in a vampire was something she had never dealt with, either, and she was too tired to want to have to think about it.

Vachon hadn't slept any better during the day than she had, and they were both exhausted. She made sure he was comfortable, then fixed herself a microwave macaroni and cheese dinner and plopped herself down at the kitchen table to eat it. She took out her notebook and had every intention of updating her findings while she ate . . .

She awoke with her head on the table, strands of her hair in the half-eaten macaroni and the ink from her felt-tip pen leaving a spreading stain on her lavender sweatshirt.

Her heart was pounding. Something had startled her awake. Again.

What now?

She sighed and deposited the cold macaroni in garbage can. She thought she heard Sidney meowing for food and expected him to come curling around her ankles. But when she realized that it wasn't Sidney making the strange noise, a cold chill traveled down the length of her back.

She was hearing it plainly. A strange sound, but not an unfamiliar one. She'd made it herself a few times thanks to her Nana's temper. It was the stifled cry of a child too intimidated or terrified to wail out loud. "What the hell . . ."

It was coming from the bedroom, but it seemed unlikely that Vachon—an adult and a vampire—would make a sound like that. Her stomach sank as the worst possible scenario crossed her mind. He'd found a victim. One small enough and weak enough for him to overcome . . .

❑❑❑❑❑

She didn't see him at first when she entered the darkened room. She found him huddled in the narrow space between her bed and the wall.

"Vachon?"

He didn't look up at her. The sound was indeed coming from him. He was crying, and saying something in a soft voice that she couldn't understand at first, but then recognized as Spanish.

"Vachon, I don't understand what you're saying. What is it? What's wrong?"

She took a step towards him and he let out a horrifying scream, nothing childlike about it. Just when she was certain her entire building was going to think someone was being tortured to death in her apartment, he became abruptly silent, as if he were suddenly gasping for air.

He began to thrash about violently, with no regard for he fact that he was slamming his head and face repeatedly into the wall and the headboard of the bed. She was certain he was having another seizure—far more violent than the others. If she didn't restrain him, he was going to hurt himself.

She heaved the bed away from the wall so she could get to him, and she managed to get her arms around his upper body. Luckily, he was still very weak, but restricting his movement was about as easy as maintaining a grip on a toddler who didn't want to be held. He seemed to be trying frantically to get away from her—or from something—and she quickly surmised that this wasn't a seizure.

He was seeing or experiencing something that wasn't happening. For whatever reason, he was hallucinating again.

"Vachon!" she yelled as loud as she could. "Stop it! You're all right. You're safe . . ."

She hated to leave him, but when she saw she wasn't getting through to him, and was in very real danger of being injured herself, she ran quickly to her medical bag and rummaged through it until she found the curare that was in there. It was certainly not something ordinarily issued to paramedics, but Nick had told her once that it would sedate a vampire and she had obtained some just in case. (Had she ever really trusted Nick completely?) She filled a syringe with it. Not too much . . . curare caused paralysis, and Vachon was barely able to move as it was.

By the time she got back to him, he had battered himself bloody. She grabbed one of his flailing arms and quickly plunged the syringe into his forearm.

He let out another ear-splitting screech and twisted out of

her grasp, bending the needle at a 90-degree angle. She wasn't sure if any of the drug had actually gotten into him.

She didn't get out of the way fast enough when his right foot came up from the floor unexpectedly. Whether it was a reflex or deliberate, he connected with the left side of her jaw. The blow rattled her teeth and made them feel as if they were being driven up into her eye sockets. In the split second of consciousness that remained after that, she wondered how he could kick so hard when he couldn't even walk.

Adrenaline rush . . .

That was her last thought before the blow sent the right side of her head crashing into the edge of the headboard.

❑❑❑❑❑

His face hurt. And something was stabbing his arm . . .

He looked and saw the syringe hanging from it. He used his thumb to flick it out of his flesh. He knew why it was there, and who had put it there. No anger. She had made the visions stop for now.

"Natalie?"

Luckily, he was lying face-down on the floor. He was in a cramped space with no room to turn over, and he'd discovered earlier that on his back, he was almost completely helpless, but this way, he could use his arms and legs to push himself up.

When he did, he saw Natalie sprawled across the bed with her head hanging over the side. She was ominously still.

He struggled to her side, and pushed her head up onto the mattress.

"Natalie? Are you okay?"

It was immediately obvious that she was not. But he sensed that her heart was still beating. She was alive, but she was hurt.

He had hurt her.

Walking was almost impossible, but he somehow got to his feet anyway and made his way into the bathroom.

He ignored the blood that he could feel trickling down his own face. He soaked a washcloth, but got too much water on it and couldn't wring it out because his hands were practically useless.

He dragged himself back into the bedroom with it and collapsed next to the bed. He draped the dripping cloth over Natalie's forehead, hoping the cool wetness would bring her around.

"Natalie, I'm sorry . . ."

When he turned her head to the side, he saw the ugly, purple welt rising along the right side of her face. A large, swollen bruise had already formed on her jaw.

He wasn't sure how hard he'd hit her. His memory of doing it was distant and hazy. But he knew a mortal could die from a blow to the head, and she had been unconscious for several minutes by this time.

He tried again to rouse her. "Natalie, please wake up!"

It was useless, he could see that.

And now an odd numbness was beginning to creep through his body. Whatever she had given him had abruptly ended his hallucinations, but now it was doing something else to him.

He was sleepy. He knew he shouldn't sleep, that he should help Natalie, but he couldn't fight it.

There was a phone next to the bed.

His eyes refused to focus, and his fingers refused to cooperate, so it seemed like minutes passed before he managed to lift the receiver and dial 911 . . .

❑❑❑❑❑

Natalie's head felt like nails were being driven into it. Big nails. Huge nails. Railroad spikes.

She had been conscious for some time, but didn't dare open her eyes. The mere thought of any light penetrating her skull made her even more nauseous than she was.

Someone was saying her name. She mumbled in response, her jaw too sore to attempt anything intelligible.

"It's Dr. Turner, Natalie. Would you care to tell me what happened?"

Lie. Think of a lie . . .

"I hit my head."

A gentle, feminine hand on her shoulder.

"Natalie, this is the second time you've shown up in my ER with unexplained injuries. I've already reported it to the police, so you might as well tell me what really happened. Who did this to you? And why are you protecting him?"

If it wouldn't have hurt to do so, Natalie would have laughed at that question. She wondered what Turner would do with an honest answer. *Well, I keep getting involved with these vampires who don't mean to hurt me, but they do. As for why I protect them, there are these big mean vampires who will hurt me even worse if I don't . . .*

She tried to sit up, but her head spun with unmerciful persistence.

"It was an accident," she muttered. "A patient. He kicked me while he was having a seizure . . . You remember him, he was here the other night."

She opened one eye just far enough to see if Turner was buying any of this.

"Who made the 911 call?"

"911 call? I . . . uh . . . it wasn't me. I don't know."

Had it been Vachon? Or had someone been concerned about all the racket and checked on her? And in either case, where was Vachon now?

It hurt to even think.

"I take it you won't be pressing charges this time, either." Turner's voice had gone from sympathetic to stern. Natalie couldn't blame her. How many battered women had she seen go back for more?

"No, of course not. It really was an accident."

Turner sighed wearily. "Well, he accidentally gave you a concussion and a hairline fracture of your jaw. You're going to have some loose teeth, but if you're lucky you won't lose any. Maybe next time you won't be. Next time, he might kill you."

"I wasn't beaten," Natalie insisted.

A discomforting thought occurred to her. "They didn't arrest him, did they?"

Turner's lips curled in annoyance. "No, they didn't . . .

I'm admitting you for observation. If you change your mind about this scumbag in the meantime, let me know." She tossed Natalie's chart in the rack and walked out, disgusted.

Natalie wondered if Vachon was still in her apartment, sick and alone and now probably scared to death. If he'd left, he couldn't have gotten far.

She made a sincere effort to work up enough concern for him to be able to get up and go home, but it was no use. Her head pounded like a bass drum and just thinking of standing up made her stomach churn. Vachon was on his own for now.

Seven

After twenty-four hours of so-called bed rest, during which she wasn't allowed to sleep for more than an hour at a time without being awakened to make certain she wasn't comatose, Dr. Turner showed up to release her.

She handed her a card with the name of a counselor who specialized in treating victims of domestic violence and the phone number of an emergency shelter.

Natalie thought about protesting one more time that she was in need of neither, but instead thanked Dr. Turner. It was good to know that if she had been in that situation, there were people like Turner who would care.

She was about to phone for a cab to take her home when Grace walked in on her.

"Grace . . . How did you . . . ?"

"Know you were here? The whole department knew five minutes after the 911 call came in. What happened Natalie? Is Nick back? Did he do this?"

Natalie sighed. "Please, Grace. I've explained that a half-dozen times, and no one believes me. I'm too tired to go through it again. Just take me home."

Thankfully, Grace didn't argue with her.

The nausea had finally abated, and she was starved, so she had Grace stop at a fast-food place on the way home. The dull, constant ache in her jaw gave her every reason to believe it was going to be an experience trying to eat solid food, but they ordered fries, burgers and everything else in the basic junk-food groups, anyway. Natalie got a chocolate milk shake, too. When all else failed, there was always chocolate . . .

She was mentally scanning her list of concocted lies to explain to Grace why Vachon was in her apartment, but when she opened the door, she saw no sign of him. She checked the bedroom and bathroom, too, but didn't see him anywhere.

The clothes she'd bought for him were still there, still in the bag from the mall. She'd thrown everything else he'd been wearing out and none of her stuff appeared to be missing. She wondered how far he'd get before someone noticed he was half naked, but something told her he hadn't gone far. Even so, she couldn't look for him while Grace was still there.

She settled onto the couch while Grace fed Sidney and brought plates for the food.

Her jaw was so sore she couldn't open it far enough to get the hamburger in. Grace got a knife and cut it into tiny bite-sized pieces for her, which helped, but chewing was still painful. She found herself cursing Vachon with each mouthful.

Grace made no more attempts to find out what had happened, for which she was grateful.

"Do you want me to spend the night? I can go home and get a few things and be right back," she offered.

"No, Grace. Thanks, but I'll be okay, really."

"Well, at least let me clean up the dishes . . ."

She carried the plates and silverware into the kitchen and was rinsing them in the sink when something caught her attention.

"Natalie?"

"What?"

"There's blood all over the floor in here . . ."

How to answer that? *It isn't mine . . .*

Well, then, whose is it, where did it come from . . . ?

Grace was bending over a spot on the linoleum. "It looks fresh . . ."

Natalie found the strength to get to her feet in an instant. She saw what Grace was looking at. Sidney had found it, too, and the evidence was quickly disappearing onto his eager tongue—a rivulet of blood that went from the refrigerator to the laundry room.

This was not good.

She couldn't even begin to come up with a lie to explain it, but her brain tried frantically to do so, anyway.

Natalie watched with mute, helpless dread as her friend followed the blood trail to the laundry room, which, of course, led her directly to Vachon . . .

Cornered, Vachon looked first at Natalie, and then at Grace's imposing form. Even if he'd had the ability to get away, there was no escape route. Natalie would have understood if he was frightened, but when she looked at his eyes, she saw more than fear. There was that blank emptiness she'd seen before. He was looking at something that wasn't there, and it terrified him.

Damn, she wished she could think straight . . .

"Who the hell are you?" Grace demanded. "What are you doing here?"

Natalie pushed past her and knelt next to the vampire. Then she made what turned out to be a huge mistake by gently grabbing his arm.

Vachon went nuts, screaming and thrashing in a frenzied effort to get away from her. Natalie knew he was hallucinating again, but Grace thought he was attacking her.

Natalie would never have guessed that a woman Grace's size could move as fast as she did, but in seconds, she had Vachon pinned to the floor and was using language that would have made a sailor blush.

Oddly, her verbal abuse seemed to bring him back to his senses. She grabbed the hair on either side of his head and lifted his face up to hers. "Was it you who did that to Natalie?" she demanded.

Naturally, Vachon made things worse by replying, "I didn't want to hurt her."

"You no good son of a bitch . . ." Grace cuffed him a

couple of times with her meaty fists before Natalie got her attention.

"Grace! Stop! Don't hurt him."

Grace let Vachon go, with an angry warning not to move. Not that there was any way he could—Grace outweighed him by at least fifty pounds and was sitting on him.

Natalie used her calmest clinical voice to explain, "Grace, this is Nick's cousin . . . Xavier." She thought using Vachon's Spanish name might result in more questions. "He's the one I told you about. He didn't mean to hurt me . . ."

Grace looked at Natalie, then at Vachon, then back at Natalie. Clearly unconvinced, she finally stood up, anyway, brushing herself off as if she'd just come into contact with something distasteful.

All three of them were clearly at a loss for words. Natalie's Lie Factory had temporarily ceased production . . .

"You can get up off the floor," Grace told Vachon, in a tone several notches away from friendly. She still wasn't convinced he was innocent of battering Natalie senseless.

Vachon tried, but it was a monumental effort which Natalie couldn't bear to just stand and watch. She went to him. "He can't, Grace . . . Give me a hand here."

Poor Grace looked like someone had hit her with a brick. Despite her outburst of righteous anger, the woman had a marshmallow for a heart. The sudden realization that she had just roughed up a disabled person devastated her.

"Oh, my God . . ." she moaned. "I'm sorry. I didn't know . . ." She rushed to Natalie's side and together they managed to get Vachon off the floor and onto the couch in the living room.

Grace checked the bruises on his face. "Lord, I know I didn't do this to you . . . What happened?"

There was still a hint of suspicion in her voice.

"They were already there," Vachon said softly. "Sometimes I hurt myself."

Something clicked and Lies began to pour from Natalie's mouth once again. "It's a seizure disorder. Part of the syndrome."

"Psychomotor epilepsy?"

Sure, Grace, whatever you say . . .

"Very much like it. Hallucinations, convulsions. He takes medication, but some of my treatments seem to have made it ineffective. Nick never had that problem, so I couldn't have foreseen that complication."

"And this is was what you couldn't explain to Dr. Turner?"

"Grace, you know why I can't discuss my research . . ."

Grace sighed. "I feel like such a damn fool!" She examined Vachon's face again. "For a minute there, I thought maybe you'd gotten a couple of licks in yourself, Natalie . . . Why were you hiding, anyway?" she said to Vachon.

Vachon shrugged. "I think I see things sometimes. And my nose was bleeding. Blood scares me."

Vachon looked up at her with those big brown eyes, forlorn and absolutely pathetic. Natalie had to hold back a laugh. The vampire had quickly found Grace's buttons and was now expertly pushing them.

Grace encircled him in a crushing hug. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay, Grace, really," Natalie said, before Vachon carried his pitiful act any further.

"Natalie, you might have told me he was here," Grace said accusingly. "How was I supposed to know?"

"Sorry, Grace," Natalie said, not even wanting to try to come up with Lies to explain Vachon's presence. "I guess I must have been a bit more out of it at the hospital than I thought."

She attempted to distract Grace by asking her to fix an ice bag for her jaw, which was much needed by that time, and a microwave dinner for Vachon, which would end up in the trash the minute she was gone. Grace was a good friend, and Natalie just couldn't shove her out the door without letting her know she had been of some help.

She set the microwave plate of ravioli in front of Vachon, but gave Natalie a questioning look. "Can he eat this? I remember Nick had so many food allergies . . ."

"This won't bother me," Vachon assured her, truthfully, as he had no intention of eating it.

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay?" she asked, Natalie.

"No. Really. We'll be fine."

Grace looked doubtful, but finally gathered her purse and car keys. "Okay, but I'm going to call here every few hours to make sure you're okay."

"That's a good idea," Natalie agreed, guilty because she was doing so only to hasten Grace's departure.

Grace reached for the door knob. "What if he has another . . . episode?"

"I know what to look for now." Natalie winked. "This time, I'll duck."

❑❑❑❑❑

Vachon poked a finger into the microwave ravioli in front of him, only to discover it was hot enough to burn him. He pulled it out instantly and gave Natalie a sheepish look. "Ouch."

Natalie fished a napkin out of her hamburger bag and wiped the hot tomato sauce off his finger.

"Have you eaten?"

He nodded. "I needed to. I was hungry."

"The blood on the kitchen floor?"

"I bit one of the bags. It came out faster than I could drink it. Then I heard you and your friend coming . . ." He pushed his hair out of his face. "She's a tough lady."

He picked his fork up and held it between his thumb and the palm of his hand and picked at the ravioli until he got one of the small pies open. He examined the contents carefully.

"Natalie . . . What happened yesterday . . . I didn't know what I was doing."

"I know, I know," Natalie reassured him. "Did you make the 911 call?"

He nodded.

"That was a big risk, Vachon. If they had found you here, you could have been arrested."

He shrugged. "I hid in the closet. They didn't even look for me. I did what I had to do."

Natalie's heart sank as memories came flooding back.

Who had called the paramedics the night she had been found in Nick's apartment? Had Nick done that much for her? She wanted to think so. She wanted that so much. It would make it easier . . .

"Well, thank you, anyway . . . How are you feeling?"

He was moving his fork from ravioli to ravioli, systematically pulling them apart. "Better. But I think it's the blood that's causing the visions. I felt them coming this time, right after I drank."

He carefully lifted each of the exposed ravioli fillings and moved them to the side of the plate. Natalie noticed that he did not really have a proper grip on the fork, but was managing quite well with it, anyway. They were smart . . . adaptable . . .

"You want to tell me about them?"

He didn't look up from what he was doing. "About what?"

"These visions . . . these hallucinations . . . what is it you see?"

He still wouldn't look at her. "I don't want to talk about it."

"They frighten you."

He turned to her, with a look on his face that was almost belligerent. "Yeah, you could say that." Back to the ravioli. "When they happen . . . I can't tell it's not real."

No matter what he was saying, he *did* want to talk about it, she sensed that.

"It might help if I knew what it is you think is happening. When I touched your arm, you thought I was going to hurt you?"

He laughed softly. "'Hurt' isn't a strong enough word . . ."

He was silent as he flipped the empty pasta squares over and began to stack them one on top of the other. Natalie didn't interrupt, but waited for him to continue.

"You've never seen anyone tortured." He stated that as the fact that it was.

"No."

"I did . . . There was nothing I could do. If I had tried to stop them, they would have killed me and done it, anyway. I was mortal then."

He sighed and closed his eyes, long, dark lashes resting again his cheeks. Bruises aside, there was still something perfect, something purely vampire about his face. For a moment, though, despite his outwardly youthful appearance, he looked incredibly old.

Without opening his eyes, he continued. "It was a little boy, four or five years old."

Suddenly, Natalie wasn't sure she wanted him to go on, but he did. He told her about witnessing a native ritual, one that had supposedly been banned by the Church, but which was still being performed in secret at the time he had arrived in the New World, before he'd sailed for Peru. It was one of many that demanded the sacrifice of a child, and in this particular instance, it was required that the child die in water, yet not drown. The little boy's hands and feet had been bound behind him and then his air passages had been filled with latex before he'd been immersed in a water-filled urn that was quickly sealed shut.

"I saw his eyes. No one knew we were watching, but he could see me where I was hiding. He looked right at me . . . After he was in the urn, you could hear him trying to get out. It took him a long time to die." He let out a sigh. "After it happened, I couldn't get it out of my head. I still have dreams about it."

"These hallucinations aren't just dreams, Vachon."

An ironic laugh. "No." He looked at her, as if he wondered if she would believe what he said next. "When they happen, I *am* him . . . Everything they did to him, what I saw . . . It's happening to *me*. I feel the pain in his chest when no air would come in. I know how scared he was . . . It's the worst fear you can imagine, Natalie, and he was just this little tiny boy . . ." His voice tapered off to a whisper. "I feel everything he felt . . . How is that possible?"

Natalie had no idea what to say. This was much heavier than she had been prepared to deal with. All she could offer was, "Imagination can be a powerful thing."

"Divia wanted this to happen. Part of her was in me, and she wanted to experience what had happened to that little boy through me. The visions were constant. The fear never went away. Then, she made me see things that she had experienced, ugly things that she had done that she was proud of, and terrible things that had happened to her . . ." His voice softened again. "And I was enjoying it."

Natalie looked at him, shocked. "What?"

"I know. It sounds sick. It *was* sick. But these visions would trigger a physical response, like the one we experience when we feed on living blood . . . " He gave her a pained look. "Do I have to describe what that's like?"

"Nick told me it's erotic, sensual . . ."

Vachon looked embarrassed. "Yes. There really is no mortal word to describe it. Nothing mortals experience is like that. But whatever Divia did to me, it magnified the sensation until the pleasure was so intense that I would have done anything to make it stop . . . I've never experienced anything that extreme. It was ripping my body apart, and the visions were destroying my mind." He let the fork slide onto the plate and covered his face with his hands. "Is this shit making any sense at all?"

Natalie reached for him and rubbed his shoulders lightly. She felt like she had to offer him something positive. "I think there might be a neurochemical basis for what's happening to you, something we can counteract. I'll run some more tests as soon as I can get back to my lab."

He looked at her and gave her a wry smile. "You're going to go to work looking like that?"

She gave him a playful nudge, the way she had done with Nick once or twice. "Well, you really know how to make a girl feel good about herself."

Nick would have teased her back with something funny. Vachon just smiled.

He finished rearranging the ravioli so that it suited him before he spoke again. In the meantime, the codeine-laced Tylenol Natalie had downed with her burger began to make her drowsy. She pulled her feet up onto the couch to get more comfortable and closed her eyes.

"Natalie?"

"Hmmm?"

Nothing. She finally opened her eyes to see if he was still there. He was, staring blankly at the food in front of him.

"I tried to call Tracy today."

Natalie sucked in a deep breath, and was more obvious about it than she meant to be. Vachon looked directly at her.

"Where is she? No one would tell me."

Natalie hated this. She was in no way ready for it. If she could have lied to him and gotten away with it, she would have seriously considered doing so, but she couldn't do that. Her stomach felt like a lead ball when she finally said the words.

Vachon looked at her, blinked. He had known, she was sure of that. He had just needed to hear it.

"How?" he asked quietly.

She told him everything.

"Nick blamed himself. If she had known he was a vampire, that he wasn't in any danger, she would have stayed where she was safe."

He closed his eyes, and turned his head downward again. "She stayed with me when I thought I was dying. She held me in her arms. If that had been the end, the last thing I would have known was that she cared about me. That made it easier, I think. I wasn't afraid . . ." He looked at her again, silently demanding an answer. "Who was with her?"

Natalie couldn't look at him. "Nick stayed until dawn. Her mother couldn't be located. Her father was out of town. He didn't get back in time. Capt. Reese stayed awhile, and then I went back to the hospital, but I was too late."

"She was alone when she died, then?"

Natalie nodded. "She was alone."

She waited for some kind of reaction, but he just stared at his hands. "She had a serious head injury, Vachon. She never woke up. She didn't know . . ."

He looked up suddenly. "She knew."

No tears. No display of emotion at all. But his pain was so intense she could feel it herself.

She sat up and took him into her arms.

Nick would have stiffened at her touch, or even pulled away. Vachon let himself collapse against her, let his weakened body mold itself to hers.

His head rested on her shoulder, and she ran her hand over the thick, dark hair. It still smelled of shampoo, with the underlying slightly sweet, slightly metallic smell that she had come to subconsciously identify as a vampire's scent.

He didn't cry. Nick had told her once that their tears were blood tears, but she'd never seen Nick cry, either. Maybe it was something they didn't—or couldn't—do in front of humans.

But Vachon made no attempt to pull away from her. It was as if he needed to share her warmth, to feel her life force encircling him.

"Did you love her?" she asked him finally.

"I don't know if that's possible. What we are . . . I don't know if we can love . . . Or be loved."

She held him tighter. Even if he couldn't cry, she could. Hot tears coursed down her face.

Oh, Nick, where the hell are you? Why did you leave? And how am I going to live without you?

"You can be loved," she whispered to Vachon. "You can be . . ."

Eight

At some point, Natalie had rested her head on the cushioned arm of the couch and fallen asleep, with Vachon still in her arms, her chin resting on his head. He'd curled his legs up and had fallen asleep next to her.

It was a most compromising position, but what the hell? They were comfortable, and who was going to see them, anyway?

She looked at the clock on her VCR. It had been almost three hours since Vachon had taken the blood from the refrigerator, and he seemed to be okay.

She rubbed his arm gently. "Are you awake?"

"Yes."

She wiggled out from behind him. "You haven't gotten sick, from the blood, I mean."

"No . . . It hurts a little, but not bad. I'm okay."

Sidney had eaten Vachon's entire microwave dinner. If she had put anything remotely like it in his bowl, he would have tried to cover it, but apparently eating it off the table right in front of her had, in his little cat mind, somehow rendered the cold, dissected pasta appetizing. She threw the plastic plate in the sink.

The phone rang.

It was Grace, calling to check up like she had said she would. Natalie convinced her everything was fine, and then listened to her apologize again for her rough treatment of Vachon. She loved the woman, but she thought she'd never stop talking.

Vachon stretched out on the couch, and when she hung up the phone, she got a blanket for him. Physically, he perhaps didn't feel any worse than she did at that point, but no one had just told her that someone she cared about was dead.

She couldn't pretend to know how he felt. How many mortal lifetimes had he been alive? How many times had he had to deal with mortal death? She didn't know, but even if he was used to it by now, it still hurt. She could see that on his face.

She sat down on the coffee table beside him. "Are you okay? About Tracy, I mean?"

He nodded, but said, "Nick should have known she was there. He should have done something."

"Nick took a bullet for her once, Vachon. If he could have done it this time, he would have. You have to believe that. There was nothing anyone could do. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. That's all."

He sighed. "I was her age when I was brought across. I was dying when it happened to me, and I remember thinking 'Not yet, I'm not ready'. I wonder if she had time . . ."

"She lost consciousness almost immediately, Vachon. I don't think she ever knew she was dying."

"Still, it doesn't seem fair somehow that I got a reprieve."

"Vachon, what happened to you doesn't happen to most people. Most of us just die."

"I know that, and sometimes I wonder 'Why me?', you know? I was nobody special. I was just there. In a certain place at a certain time. Like Tracy."

"Nothing mysterious about that, Vachon. It's called 'fate'."

"I guess so."

"You'll miss her, though."

"I always miss them."

Natalie knew that emotionally, They were as vulnerable as mortals. They grieved. They became depressed—God knows she'd learned that much from Nick.

She had no idea how deeply Vachon had cared for Tracy. Was he just her informant, like she had told everyone? Were they good friends? Did he love her? Did they love each other?

All she could think of to say was, "I'm so sorry, Vachon."

"Yeah. I am, too."

True to her word, Grace called every two hours. Apparently, she figured Natalie kept night-shift hours even when she didn't have to work. That was basically true, but she finally had to get severe with her friend and ask her not to call again because she was going to try to get some much-needed rest.

In between Grace's calls, the night was not easy on either of them. Vachon knew she wasn't a hundred percent, and never complained or asked for anything, but the blood he'd swallowed did make him feel bad. Even though he kept it down, she could see he was in pain, and from the way he lay there not wanting to move, she suspected he was probably nauseated, too. He suffered no more hallucinations, but he did have two seizures, and after the second one, she learned that he'd been having several a day, she just hadn't seen them and he hadn't told her.

They were physically exhausting, but worse, he was embarrassed by them, which made him even more miserable.

She couldn't do much more than make sure he hadn't hurt himself and offer reassurance. "They aren't as bad as they could be." That was true. They were little more than tonic muscle contractions, and comparatively mild. "It almost takes a doctor like me to notice them."

"I notice them. I don't like it," he stated the obvious, which made her smile.

"I can prescribe something that's used for humans . . ."

"Will it make this not happen to me?"

"I really don't know . . . It might. It will mean swallowing something you won't like, though."

He nodded, already sleepy even though the sun would not be up for over an hour. "I can do that."

She gave him another liter or so of blood intravenously and prepared a syringe of the curare, just in case. No point in putting him through another hallucination, even if it meant poleaxing him—and even if she had felt up to dealing with it, which she most assuredly did not.

Her head was still pounding, and she had needed to take Tylenol continuously for her jaw. She planned on jumping into the shower and then crawling into bed.

Vachon seemed comfortable on the couch, so she'd left him there after removing the IV. He'd become quiet and withdrawn, but she concluded that was probably not abnormal, even for a vampire. He would need time to deal with Tracy's death.

The hot shower did wonders and she was feeling human—funny how she was now so conscious of that word—again when she walked into her bedroom in a bulky terry robe with her hair in a towel.

She sat in front of her dresser mirror and removed the towel. Behind her, reflected in the mirror, were the first rays of sunlight against the morning sky coming through the kitchen window.

Her mind was not perfectly clear at that point—the codeine in the Tylenol was having an effect—but something nagged at the back of her mind that all was not as well as it seemed.

She ignored it. She was too tired to think about it.

She pulled on some old, stretched-out leggings and a baggy T-shirt, then tried to blow-dry her impossibly thick hair. Finally, she decided just to tie it back even though it was still damp, and leave it to worry about later.

She glanced again at the reflection in the mirror. The morning sky was beautiful—purples, oranges, yellows, all streaked across midnight blue still sprinkled with stars, and below it, the golden crescent of the rising sun . . .

The window was supposed to be covered.

She turned around and saw Vachon standing calmly in front of it, waiting to be incinerated.

"What the hell are you doing?!" she shrieked.

He no longer possessed his keen vampire hearing. In fact, Natalie had reason to doubt he could even hear as well as she did. He must have thought she was still in the shower, because the sudden sound of her voice plainly startled him.

There was already a fine mist rising from his bare skin as the cells evaporated upon exposure to the distant rays of sunlight.

She yanked the sheet off the bed and ran at him, plowing into him like a football tackle and knocking him to the floor as she threw the sheet over him.

She left him to untangle himself while she quickly replaced the plastic garbage bags that had been covering the glass.

The kind, sympathetic Natalie abruptly departed while she was doing it. "I can't believe you did that!" she yelled at him. "All of this work . . . All of *my* work trying to save your undead butt and now you try to barbecue yourself! What the hell were you thinking, Vachon? Would you like to tell me, because I don't understand this. Not any of it!"

He looked at her with those big, sad eyes, but that wasn't going to work, not this time. "Answer me, damn you!"

"It's not something I can explain, Natalie."

"Don't give me that mystical vampire angst crap, either. I had more than enough of that shit from Nick!"

He raised an eyebrow at her use of profanity. "I guess you really are mad . . ."

"I'm more than mad. I'm disgusted with the whole fang-faced bunch of you! And what about Tracy? Do you think this is what she would have wanted you to do?"

Vachon looked appropriately guilty.

"Do you?!" Natalie demanded of him.

He shook his head. "No. I guess not."

Seeing that she had made her point, Natalie softened her tone and extended her hand. "C'mon, get up. Let's see how bad it is."

He wasn't seriously injured, but it was bad enough. Mostly first-degree burns and some second degree. She applied sunburn ointment to them and he winced more than once.

"You forgot these aren't going to heal in five minutes, didn't you?"

"I admit I didn't think of that . . . Ouch!"

"Well, I'd say it serves you right, but I really don't understand, Vachon. Why did you do this? You don't want to die."

"I know," he whispered. "If it means anything, I would have gotten out of the sun before I really got hurt. I always do."

Natalie stopped rubbing in the ointment and looked at him. "What do you mean, you always do? Have you done this before?"

His only reply was a shrug, but Natalie had just had her first hint that, as had been the case with Nick, there were many facets to this vampire's personality that she couldn't even guess at. *Can we mortals really understand Them?*

However, she was in no mood to assume the role of Natalie Lambert, Vampire Analyst. She went into the kitchen to make some strong coffee. As long as the sun was still shining, there was no way she was going to sleep. It was a personal thing at this point. She wasn't about to have brought this vampire back from the brink of wherever it was the undead went only to wake up and find him a pile of ashes on the kitchen floor.

She got Vachon a soft, faded Blue Jays T-shirt that had been washed a zillion times to keep the air off of his burns and to keep the burn ointment off her couch. He almost got it on by himself.

Whether he appreciated it or not, he was getting better, and she would *not* let him undo that.

❑❑❑❑❑

She did some laundry, including the new clothes she'd bought for Vachon. If he was at all like Nick, he wouldn't like the way new clothes felt against his sensitive skin.

She phoned in a prescription for liquid Dilantin. It was a pediatric formula, but she'd be guessing at the proper dosage for a vampire, anyway, so that didn't matter. She phoned Grace to pick it up on her way to work that night. She hadn't considered what time it was, and Grace was a remarkably good sport about being awakened out of a sound sleep. Grace knew Dilantin was an anticonvulsant, and was immediately concerned.

"It's for Nick's cousin," she sighed. "He ran out."

Interesting how lies just rolled out of her mouth almost without a thought these days. *Vampires will do that to you.*

With her fifth cup of coffee, she sat in the living room chair with her feet tucked under her, watching Vachon sleep. They were almost impossible to awaken when they sensed no danger, and she'd snuck in on Nick a couple of times while he slept. It had been unintentional, but she'd felt a bit ashamed of herself anyway for just sitting there and looking at him instead of leaving a note and returning later.

They looked most like vampires when they were sleeping. Their heartbeat dropped to almost non-existent and the color drained entirely from their already pale skin. Their muscles relaxed completely, causing their facial features to sink inward slightly, giving them a frail, sallow appearance. It would be very easy to mistake a sleeping vampire for a corpse, and the younger ones had difficulty waking when the sun was out. Nick had explained this was the reason they preferred to hide while they slept. It was too easy for them to be overpowered and dragged into the sunlight if they were discovered.

Vachon lay on his side, like a mortal would, but Nick had habitually slept on his back with his hands folded stiffly across his chest, like he was protecting himself from a stake in the heart. He looked like Bela Lugosi that way, and she'd wanted to tease him about that a time or two. But, she could never share that kind of humor with him. He'd take it the wrong way, and give her some lecture about what a curse it was to be a vampire . . .

God, I miss you, Nick . . .

Despite the caffeine overload, she finally fell asleep at around four in the afternoon, which gave her about five minutes of rest before the doorbell rang.

Natalie only answered it because she was certain it was Grace with Vachon's prescription.

Instead, she was greeted with a business card in her face that she couldn't focus her eyes on quickly enough to read. Codeine and caffeine were not conducive to visual acuity . . .

The woman was already in the door by the time she was done introducing herself as Marie something-or-other. She wasn't with social services, but had a private practice counseling victims of domestic violence. Dr. Turner had given her Natalie's name when she'd noticed they lived in the same building.

"Look, really . . ." Natalie sighed. "Dr. Turner has it all wrong."

"Your boyfriend didn't kick you in the face?" she asked, as if she knew perfectly well he had.

Natalie was still trying to wake up completely. "No, of course he didn't . . . Well, he did, but he's not my boyfriend . . ."

By this time, Marie was far enough into the room to see Vachon on the couch.

"I mean, he's living here, but we're . . . uh . . . not . . ." Natalie knew she was babbling.

Marie put a hand on her shoulder. "Natalie, have you been drinking?" she asked gently.

"What? No. Yes, but just coffee . . ."

"What about your boyfriend?"

"No, he's just asleep. And he's not my boyfriend."

Vachon continued to sleep like a baby.

A bruised, scalded one.

Marie had noticed.

"What happened to him?"

Natalie resented the fact that she was once again having to explain something she'd gone over a dozen times already,

and some little tiny thread of patience in her snapped. "I slugged the little bastard with a coffee pot and then I dumped it over his head."

Marie was aghast. "Oh, my God . . ."

"I didn't hurt him. Much. He had it coming, don't you think?"

"Natalie, this is not a healthy way to deal with conflict in a relationship."

"Oh, yeah? Why not?"

Marie didn't have an answer ready for that question, but to give her credit, her professional demeanor was unshaken.

"I think you both should really come in and see me. Dr. Turner was right to suspect there is a problem in this home."

"Well, tell the good doctor thank you, but to mind her own business."

Natalie opened the door, and gave Marie a look that told her she was expecting her to walk through it.

Once she had, Natalie smiled cheerfully as if nothing had happened. "Thank you for coming. I have your card. I'll keep in touch. Maybe we can do lunch sometime."

She shut and bolted the door and headed for the phone to call Dr. Turner.

While she waited for the answering service only to find out that the doctor was in surgery, and therefore beyond her wrath at that moment, Natalie noticed a foul odor in the room.

At first, she thought maybe it was Vachon's burns, but they really weren't that serious, or that extensive.

Besides, even if she didn't want to admit it, she knew what it was.

Reluctantly, she headed for the laundry room where she kept Sidney's litter box. She couldn't remember the last time she'd scooped it out, but it turned out it didn't matter anyway. He hadn't used it. Instead, he'd left her a hefty present under the coffee table. And, no doubt thanks to his Italian dinner, it was the loose, squishy stuff that smeared across the carpet like wet plaster when you tried to clean it up.

She uttered an appropriate swear word and then spent the next forty-five minutes on her hands and knees with a roll of paper towels and a bottle of carpet cleaner.

After conquering that mess, she dragged herself into the kitchen to tackle the cat box, only to find that some of its contents had overflowed onto the linoleum, long enough ago that it had dried like paint.

After another forty-five minutes, she stood leaning wearily on her mop. Cleaning up Sidney's mess had only revealed how embarrassingly in need of a cleaning the rest of her kitchen floor was, and as long as she was ready to drop from exhaustion, anyway, she'd figured she might as well finish the job.

While she was working, Grace had stopped by long enough to drop off the medication she hoped would stop Vachon's seizures, and to admonish her for using her sick leave to catch up on her housecleaning.

The good news was that somewhere along the way, the fiery ache in her jaw had abated to a dull, bearable throbbing. Unfortunately, by the time she emptied her mop water into the commode and flushed it, she was so tired that every other bone in her body seemed to ache. And it didn't help a bit to look into the bathroom mirror and see that her hair had dried into a frizzy, tangled mass, either.

With a sigh, she realized that it was well past sundown, which meant Vachon would probably wake up at any time. She'd still have to see that he got fed one way or the other, and give him the medication Grace had brought.

She was literally sagging with fatigue as she dragged her mop and bucket into the kitchen to put them away . . .

And walked right into the first vampire she'd ever met who really, truly scared her.

Nine

This was a female vampire, but she was neither graciously demure like Janette, or delicate and dainty as Urs had been.

She was as tall as LaCroix and about as feminine, even though she was dressed in a tasteful ivory business suit with, Natalie noticed, perfectly coordinated accessories.

Natalie wasn't sure how she knew immediately that the woman was a vampire, but when she opened her mouth and bared her fangs, all doubt was removed from her mind.

"Who are you?" Natalie asked nervously.

"You have one of ours," the woman said. "I've come for him."

"Why? He's perfectly safe here—"

"He is so weak I can barely feel him."

"So? He's getting better—"

"If he cannot survive by his own instincts, he must be destroyed. That is the Code."

Natalie wanted to tell her what profane act she could perform with her precious Code, but restrained herself. "You're one of those Enforcers, aren't you? Well, I don't subscribe to your rules. Sorry."

The Enforcer looked at her indulgently. "Then I will destroy you, too. Besides, it's not your choice to make . . ."

Natalie's eyes fixed on those of the Enforcer. She couldn't break away from that stare even though she tried. She could feel the blood pounding inside her skull and could almost actually feel her thoughts being pulled in a different direction than the way she wanted them to go.

"It's . . . not . . . my . . . choice . . ." she heard herself utter. "STOP THAT!"

The Enforcer looked at her, perplexed, yet amused. "I was told you were strong."

Then, as if any further dealings with her would be completely insignificant, the Enforcer brushed past her and went to Vachon. He was wide awake by then, clearly intimidated by this woman, but he struggled to stand up in front of her.

"Don't hurt her," he said. "I'll do what you want."

Later, Natalie would look back on the incident and realize that stress, fatigue and heavy-duty pain-killers had clouded her judgment. At the time, however, she was merely pissed off.

"The hell you will!"

She stepped between Vachon and the Enforcer and the Enforcer promptly threw the two of them back into the kitchen. Just a gentle toss, really. Natalie was even able to land on her feet, albeit at a fast trot that caused her mid-section to hit the counter, knocking the wind out of her.

Vachon wasn't as lucky. A collision with the sharp corner of the counter top opened a two-inch gash in his scalp before he hit the floor. Blood gushed copiously over his forehead and into his hair, and then began to fall in drops on the white linoleum.

Sidney, nonplused by the unusual activity, immediately went to investigate the blood, and decided it was snack time.

The Enforcer grabbed Vachon's shirt and lifted him with one arm until their eyes met. She pulled him close to her and licked some of the blood from his forehead.

Vachon cringed.

"Look at you," the Enforcer said with contempt. "Full of poison and you're practically mortal."

Vachon was either possessed of very poor judgment, or he knew he had nothing to lose. His tone of voice was hostile, challenging. "Yeah? Well, if you guys had done your job and taken care of that little bitch who did this to me—"

That was as far as he got. The Enforcer tossed him at the wall, which caused everything on it to fall to the floor, including the shelf on which sat a ceramic dinosaur that Natalie's late godchild had made for her.

Seeing it on the floor in several pieces broke Natalie's heart and also dissolved all of her connections to basic common sense.

She was sharing her apartment with a sick and possibly suicidal vampire who had almost kicked her head off. Her head ached, her jaw hurt, and she had now been awake almost twenty-four hours. Friends and complete strangers were suddenly prying into her personal life. Her living room smelled like cat shit, her hair looked like a Brillo pad, and now there was blood smeared all over her clean kitchen floor which her Cat from Hell was licking up . . .

She grabbed for her mop and in one continuous movement, she broke the handle across her thigh and raised the splintered half that didn't have a mop attached to it over her head.

She looked the Enforcer in the eye.

"Get the hell out of my house or so help me, I'll stake you!"

To say the Enforcer was surprised was an understatement.

But the big vampire quickly regained her composure. "You are all I was told you would be . . . Unfortunately, there is no way you can kill me, even if I were to allow you to try."

In a blur of movement, she snatched Natalie's makeshift stake and then splintered it between her thumb and first two fingers.

She took two menacing steps forward, until she and Natalie were almost nose to nose—or would have been if the Enforcer hadn't been six or seven inches taller.

"Give me one reason not to kill you," the vampire hissed.

"Please leave her alone," Vachon pleaded. "It's me you want."

"BE SILENT!" the Enforcer growled at him.

Natalie spoke calmly. "I can't stop you if you want to kill me, or Vachon. I'm just telling you it isn't necessary. I've guarded your secrets for years, and I know more about your physiology than most of you know. I will do everything I can for him."

The Enforcer's gaze was condescending. "Will you kill for him? How long do you think you can bring him blood in Coke bottles before someone notices what you're doing? What are you going to tell them when they ask? And what if they make you stop? He can't hunt. He can't feed. He has no purpose."

"So what? Who says he needs one?"

That made the Enforcer blink, but she recovered quickly. "How many of your own kind would you sacrifice to save this vampire? If he does not kill, he will die. If he does not die, he will kill."

This discussion was becoming too philosophical for Natalie's overtaxed brain circuits. "I can't think of him that way. I can't think of any of Them . . . of you . . . that way," she sighed.

The Enforcer pursed her lips in disgust. "Then you're a fool."

She grabbed Vachon's arm and jerked him roughly to his feet.

"Know this, Dr. Lambert. There are reasons I will not kill you," she said calmly. "Not the least of them is the fact that you are mortal, yet you do not fear us. You are not repulsed by us. You are, in fact, capable of actually loving us. Humans such as you are not only rare, but occasionally necessary. And there are those among us who feel that you should be brought across. It would displease them to be deprived of that possibility."

Natalie didn't think then was the time to argue that she didn't want to be a vampire, so she kept her mouth shut.

"As for you, whelp," the Enforcer shook Vachon like he was a rag doll. "You live only because she asks it."

She turned back to Natalie. "I must be alone with him."

"Why? What are you going to do to him?"

"He must feed." She grabbed Vachon's face with her free hand and looked at him as though she was examining him for potential defects. "I assure you, he will enjoy it."

Vachon, Natalie noted, didn't seem a bit reluctant to go along with this.

She knew enough about them that she neither needed nor wanted any further explanation. She nodded her head towards the bedroom. The Enforcer lifted Vachon easily and carried him through the door, shutting it behind them.

Great. Now vampires were going to have sex in her bed.

She picked up her poor, broken mop and whacked Sidney with it so he'd leave the blood alone. She used it to clean up the blood that remained before pitching it in the trash. She snapped off what was left of the handle and kept it just in case. It was nice and sharp, and you never knew when a stake might come in handy, at least not if you were Natalie Lambert.

She replaced the wall hangings and knick-knacks that weren't broken, and got a broom to sweep up the ones that were. She couldn't bring herself to throw the shattered dinosaur away, and instead wrapped the pieces in a paper towel.

When she set it on the counter, she noticed a purse there that wasn't hers. It perfectly matched the Enforcer's perfectly

matched accessories, as a matter of fact . . .

As tired as she was, curiosity got the better of her. She opened the brown leather bag and was disappointed to find that aside from a round-trip plane ticket from Atlanta to Toronto, its contents were not that much different from her own purse. Hairbrush, make-up, keys, checkbook, wallet . . .

She opened the wallet and found it contained over $10,000 in both Canadian and American bills. There was also a Georgia driver's license. The birth date on it would have made the Enforcer thirty-two years old. "That bitch looks forty if she's a day . . ." Natalie muttered. Weight: 130 pounds. "Oh, right! In your dreams, maybe." The name on the license was Lyllia Rose Hanover-Killingsworth. "Yeah," Natalie grunted, "and what's your real name? Myrtle Scruggs?" Everything on it was probably bogus.

She was returning everything to the bag when she noticed a folded slip of paper from a 5x7 note pad poking out of the key case. Unfolding it, she saw only addresses, a few with phone numbers.

She was about to put it away when the name N. de Brabant caught her eye. Her heart skipped a beat.

Was that Nick? Of course it was. It had to be. Did this mean he was alive?!

The initials L.LC were penciled in beside the name. Lucien LaCroix.

There was no address or phone number, just a cryptic notation: "Soc-Linc C.L. 3 mi. d. S US Hwy 380." It made no sense to Natalie at that moment, but maybe when she wasn't so tired it would. She used a pen from Lyllia's purse to write the characters on the paper towel she had wrapped the dinosaur in.

After making certain there was nothing else on the paper that might be of value to her, she carefully returned it to the key case and put the purse back where she had found it.

She looked in the refrigerator, found some orange juice, and poured herself a glass. She stretched out on the couch with the TV remote, found something she had no intention of watching, and seconds later was asleep.

Ten

Natalie awoke to discover that she had slept almost thirteen hours. The sun was up, so if Lyllia hadn't already left, she was stuck with the Enforcer at least for the day.

But she found only Vachon in the bedroom, sleeping and not unconscious or dead. All of the blood had been washed out of his hair, and he'd either bathed and shaved or Lyllia had done it to him.

Amazingly, the bed had been neatly made up with clean sheets. The ones that had been on there before had been laundered along with the clothes Vachon had been wearing. Everything was sitting in a neatly folded pile on her dresser.

Well, she certainly couldn't fault Lyllia's housekeeping skills.

She knelt beside Vachon and examined him as best she could without disturbing him. All of the cuts, bruises and burns had healed. Only the lacerations on his neck had left faint red marks where the deepest gashes had been. The stake wound had been reduced to a barely noticeable indentation.

It had to have been Lyllia's blood that had done that. For a moment, she dared to hope the encounter had cured him completely, but even as she was thinking it, he had another seizure, and she remembered that she had never given him the Dilantin.

She went into the kitchen to prepare the medication and found a case of bottles on the counter. No doubt they contained blood, and no doubt it was human. She should have been appalled, but instead she was relieved that for the time being, at least, she didn't have to worry about how she was going to feed Vachon.

She used a veterinary syringe to inject the Dilantin directly into his stomach. That wouldn't work well on a human, but it was probably the best way to get it into him right then. She also drew some blood samples to take to work with her later that night. The needles didn't wake him up, but he hissed at her in his sleep. It was a reflex—if he'd really sensed she was trying to hurt him, he would have awakened, maybe before she'd even touched him.

She smoothed out his long, dark hair, gently working a few tangles out with her fingers.

Something about him was different. For the first time since she had been caring for him, he looked as if he were truly resting instead of yielding to sickness and exhaustion. He had never complained, but Natalie knew from the damage the poison had wreaked inside of his body that he'd probably been in constant pain before, even when he slept. Now, the tense, strained appearance was gone from his features. He wasn't hurting anymore.

She sat there for a few moments, studying him. Like Nick, he was perfect, even beautiful, his black, silky hair a striking contrast to his vampire-pale skin.

Nick said They were evil, but she had never believed that. Maybe some of Them used their abilities for evil purposes, but so did some mortals. If there was evil in Nick or Vachon, it was not pure. Nick's was tempered by his guilt and indomitable sense of morality. And there was an inherent gentleness about Vachon that Natalie suspected even the vampire in him shared. She did not want to believe either of them were capable of the sustained cruelty that was the trademark of true evil. Hell, even LaCroix probably wasn't all that bad . . .

Divia. Now that was Evil. But she had been the exception, not the rule, hadn't she?

As much as she would have liked to sit there and stare at the sleeping vampire, it did cross her mind that he might not appreciate it. She picked up her samples and left the room.

She showered, changed and tried to do something with her hair, and in the interim realized that her jaw was giving her very little pain. She figured she could get by on regular-strength Tylenol.

She experimented with her make-up to see how much of the damage she could conceal, and thought she had done a

pretty good job until she shopped for groceries that afternoon. More than one person gave her a questioning or sympathetic look. Thankfully, no one tried to give her any advice.

She got home just as the sun was setting. Vachon was still in bed, but he was awake.

"You look better," Natalie told him.

He frowned slightly. "I think I am."

"Lyllia . . . her blood . . . ?"

"She's very old. Very powerful." He let his breath out. "The visions are gone."

Without going into the details of their encounter, which Natalie was certain had been intimate, Vachon told her how she had let him feed, and how even her blood had triggered the horror that was only in his mind.

She had restrained him, held him close to her so that he knew he was safe, that she would allow nothing to hurt him.

"You will not see these things!" she had commanded him, and even through the psychic agony, he had known his sanity depended on him giving up his will to her completely, letting her take this terrible thing away from him.

It took special skill and great power to hypnotize a vampire, and it had not been an easy thing to undergo. But suddenly, mercifully, he knew the visions for what they were: Divia's evil inside of him, evil that would not endure because Divia was dead.

Lyllia could not promise him that the visions wouldn't come back. Perhaps only time and healing could end them permanently. But if they did return, they would not control him.

"She isn't what I expected an Enforcer to be," Natalie commented.

"Enforcers are like cops. Some of them are Enforcers because they respect the Code and the protection it provides us. Others just want an excuse to bully other vampires."

"She was going to kill you."

"If it was needed. But she knew that you didn't learn of our existence from me. I didn't violate the Code."

"But she wanted to destroy you because you're . . . hurt . . ."

"She still might have to do that. But—" he cocked his head to one side and smiled— "she seems to think there's hope for me."

Natalie leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead. "So do I."

Now <u>why</u> did I do that?? Suddenly embarrassed by the impulsive act, she handed over the clothes she'd bought for him and left him alone to get dressed.

Any hope she held that Lyllia's blood had been the miracle cure were quickly dispelled when it took him twenty-five minutes. When he finally emerged from the bedroom, he looked frustrated, angry with that frail and uncooperative body that was now his.

She had put the groceries away and was fixing herself some scrambled eggs. She had poured blood into the big gas station mug for Vachon and stuck two straws in it, the way she had done before.

He leaned against the counter, watching her cook, sipping at his drink. His appetite had not improved, but the blood seemed to relax him.

He opened the paper towel containing the broken dinosaur and examined it.

"I could fix this," he said.

"Vachon, it's in a hundred little pieces . . ."

"Fifty-nine."

"What?"

"There's only fifty-nine pieces."

He hadn't counted them. Some remarkable, unique adaptation of his vampire brain had told him in an instant how many there were. "Still, they're awfully small pieces . . ."

"I can see the difference in their shapes, and tell where everything goes."

To her, the smallest pieces looked like little more than dust. "Really? You can do that?"

"Well, right now I can't . . ." He squinted at the fragments. "But if my eyes get back to normal, I'll be able to." He tried to pick up one of the larger pieces, and was just barely able to get a grip on it. "I guess my hands would have to work better, too."

For a moment, he looked so sad that Natalie had to resist an impulse to hug him.

But looking at the paper towel, his expression quickly changed from downcast to curious. "What's this writing on here?" he asked her.

"Uh . . ." Natalie was unable to quickly come up with a lie to explain the cryptic notes she had copied from the piece of paper in Lyllia's handbag.

"Natalie?"

Why not the truth for a change? "I found that written on something in Lyllia's purse."

"Her purse?" Vachon's eyes gleamed with amusement. "You went through her purse?!"

Natalie put up her hands in surrender. "I confess. I did."

Vachon laughed, an action that seemed far easier for him than it had ever been for Nick.

"What does it mean?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know. But it was written next to Nick's name, with LaCroix's initials beside it."

He studied them closely for a few moments before finally giving up. "Read it to me."

She frowned. The letters weren't that small, and she knew perfectly well he wasn't illiterate. "You can't read that?"

His tone was impatient. "I can't *see* it."

She hadn't dared examine his eyes. Nick had never been able to tolerate having a light shined in his. "Tell me what you do see."

He thought for a moment. "It's like a TV screen with very bad reception."

Natalie was curious. "How could you see all the dinosaur pieces then?"

"Their temperature is different from the paper. Heat gives off colors that we can see, but you can't."

She understood. It was the fact that they could detect the infrared and ultraviolet spectrum that enabled them to see in the dark. Apparently, Vachon's ability to do that was unimpaired.

She pulled the paper towel towards her and read to him what it said.

"I don't get it," he frowned.

"Neither do I."

"It doesn't sound like an address."

"Unless it's some foreign country."

He took another sip.

"They could be directions."

"But to what? To where?"

"Read it again."

Natalie read. "Sock Link C L 3 miles d S U S H w y 380."

"Is that exactly the way it's written?"

"Uh . . . no."

"Read it to me exactly."

Natalie repeated it letter by letter, including spaces. Even before she was done, she saw it . . . "Of course! U.S. Highway 380. All we have to do is find out where that is. Maybe then the rest of it will make sense . . ." She shoved his mug towards him. "Eat, Vachon. You won't get well if you don't eat."

"You aren't my mother."

"Well, if she was here, she'd tell you the same thing, I'm sure."

Vachon smiled. "Yeah, she probably would."

Natalie was curious. She had to ask, "Can you remember her? I mean, that far back?" *How will Nick remember me a hundred years from now?*

He shrugged. "Of course I do. You don't forget things like that. I never saw her again, though, after I became . . . what I am."

"Why not?! How could you let her think you had just disappeared?"

He sighed. "You have to understand how it was then . . . For her, knowing what I had become would have been worse than thinking I was dead. I couldn't have fooled her. I was a fledgling vampire . . . An orphaned one, at that. I didn't have the knowledge or the control I needed to pretend I was mortal. And she was my mother. She would have known something wasn't right about me, and if she knew what I was, she would have staked me herself to put me out of my misery."

"Were you in misery?"

"No. But you didn't know my mother. It would have never occurred to her that her little Javito could possibly want to go on living as a demon." He laughed softly. "That was a long time ago."

"How old are you, anyway?"

He told her. "That sounds like a long time to a mortal, but some vampires would still consider that young and stupid."

"You're not stupid, Vachon."

"I should have known what Divia was. I should have sensed it. She laid a trap for me and I walked right into it."

He told her how Divia's masquerade as a frightened child had fooled him and given her the opportunity to attack him. "Like I said, stupid."

"It isn't stupid that you were trying to help her."

He looked at her. "Was I? Natalie, when I saw her in that alley, I was concerned, at first. I sensed the presence of another vampire, and I thought she'd been attacked. I don't know why I didn't realize it was her I had sensed. I guess because she looked so . . . innocent. I looked for marks on her neck. When I didn't find any . . ."

He looked down at the dinosaur fragments. "If she hadn't attacked me . . . It was dark. We were alone. No one would have known if I had taken her."

"Vachon, you wouldn't have done that!" But she knew better.

He looked up at her. "You know us better than most mortals, Natalie, but you can't really know us completely. Not what we feel, not what we want, not what we are capable of . . ." He touched her cheek gently. "You must never trust us not to hurt you."

Eleven

Back on the job, Natalie quickly grew weary of the sympathetic looks and the comments whispered behind her back. She felt like buying a T-shirt that said "It was an accident" or "I am not battered" on it. After the second day, she quit trying to cover her fading bruises with make-up. Let them all get a good look and gossip if they wanted to. She had other things to worry about.

She had thoroughly analyzed Vachon's blood samples herself on a regular basis over a period of several days. She thought it unwise to subject Grace to whatever Vachon's exposure to Lyllia's blood might reveal.

The results were a disappointment. The Enforcer's blood had healed his injuries, but had not neutralized the poison, nor had it boosted his immune system like she had hoped. He still had almost no antibodies of any kind. She feared that meant he was not only susceptible to injury, but to every disease imaginable. If Divia's poison hadn't killed him, chances were they wouldn't either, but they could still make him sick.

That meant isolating him if he was going to recover without any more setbacks. She was going to have to keep him in her apartment, and take precautions to make sure she didn't bring any kind of bug home with her. It was not going to be an easy thing to tell him, especially since his recovery was already painfully slow.

He had improved a little every day, but he still lacked the stamina and coordination of a healthy mortal. He could walk again, but not well, and he had recovered only some of his manual dexterity.

The seizures had stopped, but Natalie suspected that was the Dilantin. She had stopped injecting it, and had instead switched to mixing it with a couple of ounces of blood in a shot glass. She'd given him a sugar-free breath mint to swallow to see if he could take pills. The mint was not really food, but he had told her it felt like a hot rock inside of him. He'd be miserable swallowing 6-8 pills a day, so she had decided to stick with the liquid medication. He seemed to be tolerating the drug, and she saw no reason to wean him off of it just to see what would happen.

He was able to read using the magnifying goggles she had borrowed from the lab. She had obtained a Rand-McNally road atlas of North America and he had spent considerable time going over the maps one at a time trying to find US

Highway 380. He still tired easily, so it was going to take him awhile to get through them all. Natalie supposed there was probably somewhere the information could be obtained quickly, but she was still thinking about what she would do with the knowledge of where Nick was once she had it, and it gave Vachon something to do.

She had discovered that Nick Knight didn't have a monopoly on vampire depression. Although Vachon was much less vocal about it, she knew he was troubled by what had happened to him and resentful about his situation in general. He wouldn't discuss it with her, though, and became angry and sullen if she brought it up.

As had happened the last couple of days, she expected to be greeted with moody silence when she got home that morning just after 3 a.m.

But Vachon wasn't there.

She knew he had left the apartment once or twice, because there had been evidence of it; a current magazine, or groceries she didn't remember buying for herself.

He'd also purchased boots and a jacket with money Lyllia had given him, and when she looked, she discovered they were gone.

She checked the blood supply. Blood was being delivered from some anonymous source every two days now, but it was piling up. She couldn't get more than a liter a day into him. Feeding still made him nauseous, and she was certain he wasn't getting the nutrients he needed. There might be no choice but to return to intravenous feedings, something else she'd have to discuss with him.

When she found him.

She'd filled a mug for him before going to work, but it was sitting on the counter still more than half full. She was pouring what was left down the sink when she saw the road atlas literally spread out on the counter. He had pulled three pages from it and laid them side by side. New Mexico and the maps of east and central Texas. A shaky, scribbled pencil line traced the path of US Highway 380. He'd found it.

Her heart jumped as she studied the length of it from where it branched off Interstate 25 just south of a place called Socorro, New Mexico, to where it lost its identity in the nexus of thoroughfares in and around Dallas.

Then she noticed the scrap of notebook paper beside it. Vachon still could not hold a pencil properly, but he'd managed to leave her a note that didn't require too much effort to decipher. It said he'd be back, but not where he had gone.

She debated whether or not to go out and look for him. He'd be an easy target for any sociopath who wanted to take advantage of him, and unfortunately, he looked as vulnerable as he was. His movements were slow and awkward, and he needed to stop often to rest. Never mind that there were God-knew-how-many varieties of germs he'd come into contact with. And where the hell could he be at three in the morning, anyway?

There was only one place she could think of. She put her jacket back on and headed for the abandoned church that he had once called his home.

The place would have been spooky in the daytime, but at night, illuminated only by her flashlight, it positively made her hair stand on end. She could hear things crawling around in corners. Bugs, or rats, or worse. She repeatedly walked into large cobwebs that only stuck to her hands when she tried to get them out of her hair.

She finally found the space where he had actually lived. It hadn't been disturbed, and she wondered at the fact that apparently no one had been in the church at all since he had left, even though she had easily found an unlocked door. Had someone been keeping the graveyard partiers and homeless away from the place?

Vachon's belongings were covered with dust, but untouched, including a guitar and amplifier that would have brought a good chunk of drug money to anyone who wanted to just walk out with them. Under a tarp, she found his red Triumph motorcycle. Alongside it was a rusted, beat-up bicycle that she had seen before. It had belonged to his friend Screed.

There was a dark stain beside a pointed piece of wood in front of an old couch. She picked up the stake and examined it. This was where he had died in Tracy's arms.

There were very few other things. Some clothing, which she gathered up, and a few books and magazines which she left alone. There were bottles like the one in her apartment, but sniffing one, she found the contents had putrefied.

There was no indication that Vachon had even been there that night.

❑❑❑❑❑

She got back to her apartment at a quarter past four, still more than two hours before the sun came up. She decided to wash the dust and cobwebs from the church off before deciding what to do next.

She took a quick shower and was toweling off when someone knocked on the door. She pulled on her terry robe and asked who it was before opening it, even though she knew.

"It's me, Natalie. Vachon." He sounded weak, tired. "I don't have a key."

She quickly opened the door for him.

"Oh, my God, Vachon, what happened?!" He was drenched in blood, literally from head to toe. His clothes were black, so the stains weren't visible, but they were soaked, and his face and hands were covered with it. "Are you hurt?" She really couldn't tell.

"No." He took off his jacket and threw it in the corner. "No more than usual, anyway."

He pushed past her and went to the refrigerator, but he didn't open it. He leaned one arm against it and rested his head on it.

Natalie moved behind him and touched his shoulders to get him to look at her.

He jerked out of her grasp and turned on her. "LEAVE ME ALONE!"

His eyes were glowing, yellow with blood-red flecks, and it was the first time she'd actually seen his fangs extended to their full length.

The vampire was fully awakened, hungry and enraged.

Natalie stepped back, and fought the urge to hide from him. She felt like the owner of that cute pit bull puppy who had

grown up and ripped the arm off the neighbor's kid. She knew the blood on Vachon wasn't his.

But, she let her physician's instincts take over.

She knew that in that state Vachon was at worst lethal and unable to control himself, and that at best he was aroused and uncomfortable.

Boldly, she edged him aside and got a bottle of blood from the refrigerator. She pulled out the cork with her teeth while she led Vachon to the table and sat him down.

She pushed the bottle into his mouth.

"Drink," she said gently. "You'll feel better."

He took a couple of greedy mouthfuls, but he was still unable to swallow large amounts quickly. It gagged him, which made him even madder. He shoved the bottle to the floor, splashing blood every where.

Natalie held her breath waiting for his next move, realizing that she might be in serious danger.

But Vachon folded his arms in front of him on the table and put his head down. His posture was one of utter defeat, and was painful to see.

Natalie pushed back his hair. "What happened?"

He didn't look up. "The Hunger came back. I had to take care of it."

She stayed calm, nonjudgmental. "Did you?"

"I tried. I couldn't."

She closed her eyes, fearing the worst. "Tell me."

"Some old wino sleeping in the park. I thought he wouldn't wake up . . . I opened the vein, but I couldn't drink fast enough. And, he fought me. I couldn't hold him. He bled to death before I could get enough."

He was very blunt, not interested in sparing her feelings at that point.

She put her hand on her forehead. "What did you do with the body, Vachon?"

"I left it. I couldn't move him. It was a wooded area. No one saw us."

Natalie wondered if she had become totally numb to these creatures. She felt no real shock, no revulsion. She pitied that poor, unwanted soul who had spent his last moments wondering what the hell was happening to him, but what was done was done.

She got another bottle from the refrigerator and filled his mug. She warmed it in the microwave before she gave it to him so he wouldn't have to drink it cold. (So it would taste more human . . .) She stuck two straws in it like she always did, to make it easier for him to drink.

"Slowly," she told him softly. "Small swallows so you don't choke on it."

He wouldn't take the mug, so she forced the straws between his lips. "Keep drinking until you're okay."

He closed his eyes and pulled the liquid into his mouth. She refilled the mug until he'd finished almost three bottles. By then his fangs had retracted and his eyes had returned to their natural brown color, but he was still tense and upset.

She urged him up out of the chair. "Let's go clean you up."

She led him into the bathroom and turned on the shower. He pushed her hands away when she tried to remove the sticky, blood-soaked T-shirt he was wearing.

He sat on the floor to remove his boots. The only reason Natalie hadn't advised him against getting them in the first place was because they did stabilize his ankles, making it easier for him to walk. But the laces were difficult for him to manage, and she couldn't even imagine how much work it had been for him to tie them without her help. As he attempted to undo them, his uncoordinated fingers only succeeded in getting them hopelessly knotted. There was no way he was going to remedy the situation, but he kept trying, and getting angrier and angrier.

Finally, he punched the side of the cast-iron bathtub as hard as he could, because it happened to be there. That had to have hurt, but he didn't make a sound.

He put his head on his raised knee and wrapped his arms around his leg. His hair fell forward and completely obscured his face, but an almost imperceptible rising of his shoulders gave him away.

They do cry.

Her instincts told her that anything but casual indifference at that point would be the wrong move.

She knelt on the floor in front of him and removed the boots. And without a word, she pulled off the bloody shirt and unfastened his jeans. That was all she did. She knew she would have to leave him alone for now.

Twelve

She threw the shirt in the washing machine, scrubbed the blood off the boots, cleaned up the spilled blood that Sidney hadn't yet managed to lap up off the kitchen floor, and then sank into her big, overstuffed chair.

The entire incident had taken on a surreal quality.

There was a confessed murderer in her shower, and she didn't think a thing of it. Or maybe she did, and the shock hadn't set in yet.

She sat there and let her mind go blank until he came out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist. He asked her what to do with the rest of his bloody clothes.

She took them from him and started the washing machine. She also retrieved his jacket and checked the washing instructions. "Professionally Clean Only."

Well, she hoped Lyllia had given him enough money to get another one. She sealed it in a garbage bag. The blood on it was going to start to stink in a couple of hours.

She walked in on him in the bedroom, trying to dry his hair off. She took the towel from him and did it for him, a friendly gesture rather than a pitying one, and he took it as such.

"Are you okay now?" she asked when she was done.

He gave her that wistful smile of his. "Yes. I'm sorry if I scared you."

She patted the side of his face playfully. "I gotta admit, the

vampire act is pretty intense."

He grabbed her hand. Not hard. His grip was still practically non-existent.

"Thank you," he said. "For everything."

He pressed her palm to his lips and kissed it.

Then he looked at her. Not a vampire, a man. In those deep, dark eyes she saw . . . what? Affection? Longing?

He put his arms around her and hugged her close. Not strong arms, not like they should have been. Not like Nick's. But they held her for a long time. Longer than Nick had ever dared. And she just let them.

Finally, he pulled back and looked at her. Warm, gentle eyes in a cold, killer's body.

He caressed her cheek, stroked her hair.

Then he leaned forward and kissed her.

His mouth was cool and she felt the chill as his tongue brushed across her lips. She remembered what had happened each and every time she had tried this with Nick. It had ended up with him pulling away from her and hating himself and leaving her with a lonely, empty feeling that she would never be to him what she wanted to be.

Despite this, she found it surprisingly easy to respond to Vachon's kiss. When she felt his cold hands push the front of her robe apart and brush lightly across her breasts, she knew she should stop him, but she did not. She did not think Vachon would try to force himself on her, but maybe he wouldn't have to . . .

What was she thinking!!?

He backed away from the kiss, and touched her face again.

"Make love to me, Natalie."

NO!

Too many thoughts tried to crowd her mind at once. From a strictly clinical point of view, she knew enough psychology to know that *he* had to know he could do this. From a common sense point of view, she knew it could end up with her dead. And from a point of view that completely bewildered her, she didn't *not* want him . . .

She put her hand on his face. "Vachon . . ."

"I can't hurt you. I'm not strong enough. You'll be able to stop me if you have to."

That much was true. She was still physically stronger than he was, as well as faster and better coordinated.

He kissed her again, and she found herself sliding the towel from around his waist. It briefly crossed her mind that his nervous system might be so damaged he would not be able to perform, and she might be courting a liaison almost as disastrous as the one she had experienced with Nick.

He pushed her robe all the way open and pressed his body against hers. The soft hair on his chest and belly tickled her bare skin, and she could feel that whatever doubts she might have about his abilities were completely unfounded. She did have to fight the temptation to recoil from contact with his body, though. He was so incredibly cold . . .

This is how it would have been with Nick. How it should have been, could have been . . .

He put his hands on her lower back and pulled her hips up against his, rocking slowly, gently against her as her arms encircled him.

It had been so long since she had wanted any man but Nick. So long since any man had wanted her this way.

She let her robe drop to the floor and guided him down onto the bed.

His weight felt good against her, and the warmth from her body quickly made him feel less cold to her touch.

She caressed the length of his back, feeling the curves of the muscles, their firmness. She wondered if Nick would have felt that way. Maybe not. He wasn't built the same way Vachon was, less wiry, larger and more muscular. But that cool, cool, soft, perfect skin . . . that would have been the same. This is how it would have felt to touch him, to lay with him . . .

Whether it was her fantasies of Nick, or the fact that Vachon knew what he was doing—where to touch her and how—she was more than ready for him when he slid easily into her. He felt cold inside of her, but other than that, not different from a mortal. *So much for vampire-romance-novel proportions . . ..*

She forgot her guilt, forgot who—*and what*—she was with, and simply enjoyed it.

She thought he was enjoying it, too, but he kissed her lightly and abruptly stopped.

"Natalie?" Something was bothering him.

"Hmmm?"

He hesitated a moment. "There will be blood . . ."

"What?"

"When I . . . finish. It's blood. Not . . . what you're used to . . ."

She nodded. Nick had never shared this fact with her, but she had suspected it.

"It's okay," she told him, drawing him close to her again. "It's okay."

His efforts became more determined then, more deliberate . . . He knew exactly the right tempo, exactly the right intensity, and exactly when to modify both . . . *Well, he's had 500 years to learn.* This was apparently something he could still do as well as before he was hurt, and that seemed to give him the incentive to make the best of it for both of them.

At one point, he raised himself on his elbows and looked down at her, not breaking his rhythm. She closed her eyes so she didn't have to make eye contact.

Does he know I wish he was Nick? If I look at him, he'll know.

Luckily, he either lacked the motivation or the stamina to maintain that position for long, and after a few moments she could no longer feel those dark eyes on her.

Those eyes that weren't Nick's . . .

She felt his mouth on hers again, his tongue seeking hers. She returned the kiss, curiously exploring his mouth, the way she would have done Nick's if he had ever let her.

His fangs were sharp, although instead of the keen points she expected, she found the tips to be more like tiny serrated knives. They were only partially extended at that point, but she knew how vampires had sex, that those fangs were especially sensitive during intercourse. She ran her tongue down the length of each one, careful not to drag it across the razor sharp ends. She worked her way up to the base of one of them, and licked at it enthusiastically.

Suddenly, a convulsive spasm surged through Vachon's

body, and she felt the fangs extend to their entire length. He broke the kiss and stopped moving completely, looking at her again. For a moment, she thought that she had caused him to lose control, that it was over.

But his eyes were gold, his fangs now plainly visible. He was still erect inside of her, still wanting. A low, deep growl rumbled in his throat. She'd heard Nick make a similar sound when he was angry, but this was more like a cat's purr. She saw that beyond the fangs there was the hint of a smile. Vachon wasn't angry. He was letting her know it felt good. He covered her mouth with his again, his tongue guiding hers towards his fangs, inviting her to continue.

His excitement aroused her. She had never done this for Nick. He'd never let her. And Vachon was eager and more than able to please her.

She unexpectedly climaxed well before he did, which was probably fortunate. She was still enjoying the last of her pleasure when his thrusts became forceful, more urgent . . . and his head dropped to the side of her neck.

She felt his cool breath against her ear, desperate, pleading . . . "I need to bite . . ." he panted. "I need to . . . now."

She considered just throwing him off of her. She could have done it. He wasn't *asking* for permission, he was *telling* her he was going to bite her, that he needed to do this to complete the act.

She took his head between her hands and forced him away from her neck, so that his mouth was against the trapezius muscle in her shoulder. There were no major blood vessels there.

He kept trying for her neck, but she held him off, until finally, unable to resist the demand of his body to bite *something*, he sank his fangs deep into her flesh.

It hurt like hell, and he wasn't a bit gentle. Almost immediately, he was sucking fiercely at the wounds he'd made, determined to drink as much as he could get out of her unyielding flesh.

His thrusts continued, fierce and unabated, to the point where it was becoming painful. He was ready to come, and wanted to, but the stimulation just wasn't enough.

She knew what she was about to do was probably foolish, almost as soon as the thought formed in her mind to do it.

Keeping his head firmly in place with one hand, she pushed his hair away from his neck with the other.

She brushed her lips against his neck, and in response, his entire body strained with anticipation.

Their necks were sensitive to erotic stimulation. Nick had told her that much, and had never let her near that part of his body. Vachon, however, clearly wanted to be touched there. He wasn't holding back, yet she sensed that his need had become almost unbearable . . .

She bit him.

It was just a nip, a small fold of cold skin between her teeth. But she bit him hard enough to draw blood. Hard enough that the sensation made him gasp with pain and ecstasy. He moaned softly and instantly released himself inside of her.

God, she was going to be sore later . . .

His blood was in her mouth. Vampire blood.

She didn't realize it until she felt the odd tingling on her lips and in her mouth and throat. It was not at all unpleasant, but brought her to her senses like an electric shock.

She quickly released him, stunned by what she had done.

Eventually, he was satisfied, and he slowly withdrew his fangs. She was going to have a historically massive hickey on her shoulder, and the bite would take days to heal, but she was hardly thinking of that at the moment.

He wiped his own blood from her lips and licked it off his fingers. As if he'd read her mind, he said softly, "You didn't drink enough. And I didn't drain you. It's okay. The effect will wear off in a few minutes."

She was a bit sorry to hear that. What she had done should have repulsed her, but instead had left her feeling strangely euphoric.

He withdrew from her and rolled onto his side next to her. She knew he had probably just used up every bit of the limited strength he had, that he had to be exhausted. His blood-sweat was on her body as well as his. They'd both have to shower again.

She sighed, relieved by what he'd just told her. "I'm sorry I did that to you."

He looked surprised. "I'm not." He slipped his arms around her so that his chest was pressed against her back. "The biting gives us pleasure. More than you could know. I liked it. I liked it a lot." He fingered the wounds on her shoulder tenderly, and then kissed them as if that would make them better. In a way, it did.

Their shared intimacy had been an experience she would not regret, but still, she had to tell him, "Vachon, we can't do this again. Not ever."

"I know."

"Please believe me, it has nothing to do with you . . ."

"I know. I know," he whispered softly. "I tasted it. It's in your blood. You love him very much. Maybe more than even you know."

She felt a tear roll down her cheek. "I can't make myself believe that I'll never see him again."

He buried his face in her thick hair. "I know how that feels."

She hesitated a moment before she dared to say it. "Tracy?"

He didn't answer right away, but finally said, "I could have saved her."

"You mean you would have made her what you are."

He released his hold on her ever so slightly. Her comment had hurt his feelings, and that was bad enough. But had her blood also told him that Nick had wanted to bring Tracy across? That it was her own petty jealousy that had stopped him? Did he also know that every time the image of Tracy's young, eager face, with that funny little smile of hers, flashed through her mind, she hated herself for that?

How do you make up for denying someone eternity?

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded, Vachon. I'm sorry."

He took a deep breath. "Natalie, I'm okay with what I am. I always have been."

"You've never been afraid?" Before she knew Nick, she would have been horrified to have awakened a vampire. And now that she did know him?

"I was a little, at first, but not because of what I had become. It was just so different." His tone lightened a bit. "And, of course, I'd pissed the Inca off right from the start . . ."

"Nick told me about him. He was your brother . . . your vampire brother . . ."

"More than a brother. A twin. Our master drank from us both before she brought us across. We shared not only her blood, but through her, we shared each other's blood as well. The vampires in us are identical . . . And I tried to kill him." He didn't sound particularly remorseful. In fact, he laughed and added, "Bad vampire."

"It's too bad what happened to him."

"Nothing happened to him," he said softly. "For whatever reason, he just decided to leave me alone for now."

"But the bomb . . ."

"He could have tossed that thing a mile into the air before it went off. I'd know if he was dead. I would have felt him die. I didn't. He's gone, but he's not dead."

"Nick hated being a vampire. He thought he was damned."

"I've never believed in damnation. Not even when I was mortal and still went to Mass."

"He thought that what you are is a curse."

Vachon laughed casually. "Some of us think Nick is a curse."

That hurt *her*. Now it was his turn to apologize. "Nick thinks he is evil, that we all are. Tracy thought that, too." There was more pain in his voice. "She told me."

"But she did love you, Vachon."

"Sometimes that's not enough, though, is it?"

She pulled his arms tighter around her. They both needed that closeness. "No. No it isn't." She thought then was the time to ask him what she had been wondering about. "Vachon, why did you burn yourself when you knew she was dead? I don't understand."

He thought about it so long she thought he wasn't going to answer. Finally he said, "Sometimes we can't *feel* things, not like we want to. Mortal death never gets easier, especially when it's someone you care about. But after such a long time, grief just isn't there. You would think that would be a blessing, but it isn't." He sighed, "I couldn't hurt for Tracy, and I wanted to . . . I *needed* to . . ."

"So you gave yourself the pain . . ."

"It was something I had to do. I don't expect you to understand. I really don't myself."

But suddenly she did understand. All those months . . . She had hurt for Nick not because she had lost him, but because she had rejected what he was, and as a result had never realized until that moment that she had loved the Vampire, too. She had grieved for the loss of only part of Nick, the part she could accept. Like Vachon, she wanted to hurt, but she couldn't. Not completely. Not until now . . .

The tears came freely. She couldn't stop them.

And Vachon knew. From her blood, he knew.

"We'll find him, Natalie," he whispered finally. "I promise."

Thirteen

Vachon's victim was delivered to the morgue two days later. Andrew Matthias was forty-four years old, even though he appeared twenty years older, homeless, no known next of kin. His autopsy report stated that the cause of death was exsanguination, the result of a perforated carotid artery. It further reported that a piece of glass had been found lodged in his neck, and was the probable instrument of his death. No foul play was suspected. Indications were that he had probably fallen on it while in an inebriated state. Natalie signed the report. The non-existent piece of glass would get lost in the system somehow, and no one would care.

The lab work showed the poor man's blood alcohol level was almost high enough to kill him all by itself. He had not had long to live, anyway. Surprisingly—and lucky for Vachon—he didn't appear to have any communicable diseases more serious than a mild respiratory infection. His liver was inflamed, but, to Natalie's great relief, it turned out to be the result of too much booze and not an infectious form of hepatitis. In the heat of passion, as it were, she had failed to consider any blood-borne organisms Vachon might have ingested from this guy could have easily been passed on to her.

She finished filing the report, released Mr. Matthias' body for burial, and then went to the locker room to change out of her soiled scrubs before leaving for home.

Before putting her blouse back on, she took a look in the mirror at the bite marks on her shoulder. They weren't infected. She'd kept them clean, and had prescribed herself a course of antibiotics, just to be on the safe side. It was probably unnecessary, since, unlike humans, vampires did not harbor harmful bacteria in their mouths, but she really didn't need another trip to the hospital to explain the two deep puncture wounds and the saucer-sized bruise that surrounded them.

She rotated her shoulder to ease some of the stiffness. The bite did hurt.

"Good heavens, Natalie, what did you do to yourself!?"

Now where the hell had Grace materialized from?

"Uh . . . Hi, Grace."

Grace moved in for a closer look.

"Sweet Lord above, how did you get that?"

Lie. Think of a lie.

Today's quota had already been used up covering for Vachon . . .

"My, uh . . . neighbor has this pet komodo dragon and I didn't know that they bite and I was holding it and . . ."

Grace looked at her askance, not buying a word of it. Natalie didn't blame her. Even she thought that excuse was well beneath her usual talent for fabrication.

"Okay, the truth. It was so silly . . . I was reaching into my

closet and there was a pair of scissors on the shelf I had forgotten about, and I pulled out a box and knocked it off the shelf and they were open and they stabbed me. It was a pretty high shelf, so I guess they fell with a lot of force . . ."

She was babbling, and Grace was still giving her that odd look that was her gentle way of saying "bullshit'.

"I swear, that's the truth!" She quickly slipped her blouse on to cover the injury.

Grace continued to give her that you-are-really-losing-it-girlfriend stare of hers.

"What really happened, Natalie? Was it that guy you have living with you? That Xavier?"

For some reason, that made Natalie giggle. There was no reason she knew of that she should be in a good mood, but she was, and, in fact, had been ever since . . . *Ever since I drank his blood? Is that what did it?*

She gathered her belongings, preparing to leave. "You want the truth, Grace?" She pinched the large woman's cheek as she departed. "A vampire bit me."

❑❑❑❑❑

Vachon had made a mess out of the apartment. He seemed to have an insatiable curiosity regarding everything she owned. It had only recently surfaced because up until then, he had been too sick to do much except lie quietly on the couch. But now he wanted to know what was on her book shelves, in her refrigerator, under the bathroom sink . . . The oddest things fascinated him: marshmallows, ant traps, frozen vegetables, popcorn, the green particles in Sidney's cat litter. Thanks to him, she now knew that bananas were actually divided into three longitudinal sections, and that chewing gum dissolved in peanut butter . . .

She had no deep dark secrets to hide, and to give him credit, he stayed out of personal areas like her dresser drawers. But sometimes he dropped things, or had difficulty putting them back the way he found them, and he seemed perfectly happy to just leave them where they fell.

This time he had left a container of ice cream melting on the counter.

"Vachon, the words 'freezer' and '*ice* cream' are not just a coincidence." She threw the soggy mess in the trash.

He looked up from the maps he was studying. He didn't need the goggles any more.

"Sorry."

"No, you're not . . . Did you take your medication?"

"I forgot."

She took the shot glass out of the dishwasher, poured a teaspoonful of Dilantin into it, then filled the rest with blood. She swirled the concoction around to mix it and handed it to him. He hated the way it tasted, but he never made those funny faces that she had come to expect from Nick.

"I think I figured it out." He pushed the map in her direction. "See the green writing? The capital letters? Those are the names of counties. I think 'C.L.' means 'county line'. See those two counties?"

She looked where he set his finger down. In green capital letters were the names 'Socorro' and 'Lincoln', adjacent counties in southern New Mexico. He pointed to the notation 'Soc-Linc' she had copied from Lyllia's note paper. Natalie studied the map and the cryptic directions. "And the rest of it is three miles due south . . . Three miles due south of Hwy 380 at the Socorro-Lincoln county line?"

"That's what I'm thinking." Vachon agreed with her conclusion.

"But there's nothing there, Vachon. No town, no road . . ." She noted a muted red outline on the map. "And you're really close to a military installation." The only marking on the map in the vicinity of that location was the word "Malpais".

"It's Spanish," Vachon informed her. "It means 'bad country' or 'badlands'."

And the adjacent military base was a missile range. Natalie didn't like the sound of either. "This doesn't sound too inviting."

"It's desert country."

"Why would LaCroix be there?"

Vachon shrugged. "Maybe he wanted privacy. A location like that wouldn't be easily accessible even to another vampire. Too much sun and no place to hide from it."

"But you think Nick is there."

"I think LaCroix is there. And I think Nick is with LaCroix. But there's only one way to find out for sure, and that's for me to go there."

Natalie didn't look up from the map. She had the absurd feeling that if she took her eyes off of this forsaken place where Nick might be, it would go away. "Don't be ridiculous, Vachon. You aren't strong enough."

"Then come with me."

That did make her look up. "Are you crazy?"

He pretended to think that over. "Yes, but I'm getting over it."

"What are we going to do for money?"

"Lyllia gave me ten thousand dollars." He said this like it was something that happened to him every day. "I still have most of it."

Natalie was not at all sure this was something she wanted to do. It was one thing to dream of being reunited with Nick. It was quite another to go chasing after him without knowing what she might find, or even if he wanted to be found, especially if he was with LaCroix.

Even so, she found herself considering Vachon's idea.

"I don't have any more vacation or sick leave coming. I'd have to take a leave of absence . . ."

And she couldn't take money from Vachon. He might feel he owed it to her, but he didn't. Even though it was unintentional, he'd given purpose to a life she had thought was going nowhere. That had been payment enough. Besides, she had no idea how long it would take him to recover completely from the damage Divia had done to him. She had learned in one of her many conversations with Nick that he occasionally earned money as a musician, but that was out of the question for now. He could no more play a guitar than he could take a stroll on the beach at noon. He'd need the money to support himself until he was well.

She would have to see how she was set financially before she made the decision to go without a paycheck for however

long it took to find Nick . . .

It embarrassed her that she had not balanced her checkbook in months—since before Nick had left, before the Assault. After it had happened, she'd had no interest in shopping just to spend money. She knew how much she got paid, she knew how much went out in bills. She knew she had made no purchases that would have overdrawn her account, so she hadn't even opened her bank statements.

Perhaps she should have. The most recent one reflected a balance of over half a million dollars.

She showed it to Vachon. "Talk about a bank error in your favor."

They began opening the other statements, trying to figure out exactly when the error had occurred.

Vachon found it. $500,000 had been credited to the account just days after the Assault, while she had still been in a coma.

"I'll go by in the morning and tell them it's a mistake."

❑❑❑❑❑

But it wasn't a mistake. She spoke with the bank agent who had accepted the deposit.

"I remember it well. The gentleman came to my home and made special arrangements for me to meet him here after normal working hours."

Natalie gave him a suspicious glance. "Do you normally provide service like that?"

"Of cou . . . Uh, well, no, not exactly, but he was so . . . persuasive." The man shook his head as if flies were buzzing around it. "Excuse me, but are you saying you didn't know about this? He did have your power of attorney . . ." The man fumbled through her file and came up with a neatly folded sheet of paper that he handed to her. Not surprisingly, it was completely blank. "I don't understand . . ." he stammered.

"Don't worry about it. Just tell me what he looked like."

The employee described the man who had put the money into her bank account.

LaCroix.

Fourteen

Natalie's leave of absence had been arranged on the pretense that she had the opportunity to do forensic research at an ancient Native American archeological site. Everyone bought this except Grace, who nevertheless respected her privacy enough not to pry for details, even when Natalie asked her to cat-sit Sidney in her absence.

There were numerous other particulars that needed tending to. For one thing, they'd have to take Vachon's food supply along with them. As Natalie had suspected, there were all kinds of customs regulations regarding the transport of a possible biohazard across the border, and a ream of paperwork that had to be completed.

Also, Vachon would need identification to board a plane, and he didn't know what had happened to his driver's license. It had been in the pocket of his leather jacket, the one Tracy had buried him in. She had to have put it on him after she thought he was dead. Natalie hadn't thrown the ruined jacket out, but the license was no longer in it. Both Natalie and Vachon suspected the young detective might have kept it. Her personal belongings had long since been claimed from her desk at the precinct, and it would be awkward to contact her family about it. Vachon still had the forged documents he'd used to obtain it at the church, but it had been issued to J.D. Valdez, who was supposed to have died in a plane crash. If the DMV didn't catch that little detail, it would be no problem, but if they did question it . . .

They had no choice but to take a chance. With no vampire connections in Toronto, Vachon was on his own.

The scant information Vachon was able to scrape up on the Malpais revealed that it was a lava flow, fairly recent in geological terms. The terrain was so inhospitable that it could not be crossed without great risk, even on foot or horseback.

"How hard can it be to walk across a few flat rocks?" she had asked Vachon.

He could only shrug. He'd never been there. In fact, in five hundred years, he'd never gone near a volcano. The idea of a mountain exploding and spewing molten rock was one he had preferred not to deal with. Even immortality had its limits. Still, he had every intention of being prepared for the inhospitable terrain, and his plans didn't include walking across it.

"I do *not* think that is a good idea, Vachon. What happens if you dive off the roof and you *can't* fly? Your broken bones aren't going to heal in an hour. They could take weeks."

"Then we'd just have to wait until then. But if this place is as bad as it sounds, we can't be marching all over it when we don't even know exactly what to look for. The best way to find anything will be from the air."

"Then we'll rent a helicopter . . ." *God knows we have the money . . .*

"Not that close to a U.S. military installation. They're kind of touchy about that sort of thing. At least vampires don't show up on radar."

She had to concede he had a point, and she had no doubt that LaCroix had picked such a remote area exactly for the reason that only a vampire would have a chance of finding it.

"Okay," she sighed. "But first you have to do something for me . . ."

She opened the coat closet in the living room to discover Vachon had probably already been through it. But what she was looking for was right where she had left it. She took out the box and set it in front of him.

He peered into it curiously. "Rollerblades?!" He laughed.

She was nonplused. "Nick and I thought we'd try it once."

"Nick? On rollerblades?!" He laughed harder.

"What's so damn funny?" she said defensively. "A lot of people do it." She tossed the skates aside, and then shoved the box towards Vachon.

He studied the elbow pads, knee pads, wrist guards and helmet and then said, "I am *not* wearing those."

She planted the helmet on his head. "Yes, you are. We don't need you turning your brain into paté, and the rest will give you some protection if you fall like a rock."

They took the elevator up to the top floor, but climbing a flight of stairs was necessary to get to the roof. Vachon had a difficult time negotiating them, but did it on his own.

Natalie found a spot on the roof where the drop-off was only about a dozen feet onto the roof of the floor below.

Vachon just barely tolerated having the protective accessories strapped into place, but he did allow Natalie to steady him as he managed to get his legs over the guardrail.

His balance was terrible. If he didn't jump, he was likely to fall. Natalie clung to his arm with all her strength.

"Natalie?"

"What?"

"You're digging your fingernails into me. It hurts."

"I'm afraid you're going to fall."

He peered down, an uncertain look on his face.

"So am I."

"Then get down. You don't have to do this."

"Yes, I do." He gave her that funny little smile of his.

She understood. This wasn't macho bullshit. This was trying to be a vampire again. Even so, his next request surprised her.

"Push me."

"What?"

"Just count to three and push me."

"Vachon, don't ask me to do that."

"Please. I'm ready. I just need a little . . . incentive."

"You're sure you're ready?"

"I'm sure."

"On three . . ."

She pushed him on two. By the time she got to three, she would have changed her mind.

She closed her eyes and waited to hear the thud as vampire met hard surface, but it never came. Just a faint scraping sound as he landed.

She peered over the edge. He hadn't landed standing up, but apparently he wasn't hurt. He slowly got to his feet, and with a soft whooshing sound, he was back at her side.

He could fly.

However, Natalie could offer no advice on whether it was safe for him to do so. She knew his physical limitations, but she didn't know how vampires flew. Nick had tried to explain it to her once. Apparently, there was a physical sensation involved, a feeling he described as that of being lifted by an invisible string that was anchored at the center of his body. But, when she had asked him if he did something to create this sensation, or if it was a manifestation of something that was already happening, he couldn't answer. So, did flight depend on physical strength and endurance, or was it only a matter of will, or both?

Vachon didn't seem to care a bit what the answer to that was. He was simply happy that he could do it.

He pushed the helmet off and kissed her on the cheek. "Let's go find him."

❑❑❑❑❑

She updated her notes and performed a final set of blood and tissue analyses on Vachon before they left. Even though he was still a long way from being a healthy vampire, the fact that he was consuming blood normally again had resulted in noticeable improvements.

Ironic how she had so hoped for a completely opposite result when her patient had been Nick . . .

He still had no supernatural resistance to disease or injury, but was now producing minute numbers of those industrial-strength vampire antibodies. His sight and hearing were still nowhere near what they had been, but were almost perfect by mortal standards.

His mobility was still impaired, though, and Natalie could not help but wonder how much more she could be doing for him if he were human. There were numerous diagnostic tests that could reveal exactly what damage had occurred, and where, so she wouldn't have to stab in the dark, treating only his symptoms, and maybe get some real results. She also had no doubt that a good physical therapist could probably work wonders with him, but that, too, was out of the question.

And what was her idea of rehabilitation? Drag him across the continent to a place that apparently was not fit for man, beast *or* vampire! She hoped they weren't both making a big mistake.

At work, she tucked her notes away where no one would think to look for them—in J.D. Valdez's autopsy folder. The file was inactive, and the folder virtually empty, indicating that the only remains found at the site of the plane crash had been a severed hand that could not be matched to any other passenger and therefore was presumed to have been his. No mention that the hand had mysteriously disappeared from a body bag at the makeshift morgue. Nick had seen to that.

As she moved to close the drawer, her finger brushed another, more recent folder. Tracy Vetter. Morbid curiosity led Natalie to open it and review the findings. There were two photographs of her, one post-mortem, the other a larger version of her department ID photo, which was really quite flattering. *She would still be here if I hadn't stopped Nick . . .*

Before she put the folder back, she slipped the second picture into the pocket of her lab coat.

Vachon had whammied himself a new driver's license. He was insufferably pleased with himself that he hadn't had to present any documents whatsoever, or demonstrate that he could operate a motor vehicle, which, given his physical condition, he probably could not. Natalie had to remind herself that illegal behavior was not something to applaud when he triumphantly showed her the little piece of plastic.

"So the whammy still works," she laughed as she examined the document. "You're lucky. What if it hadn't?"

"I would have just pretended I didn't know anything about getting a license and told her I'd come back later. But she was easy. Some people go under better than others. Some can resist no matter what you do, others, all you have to do is look at them and that's it, they're gone."

She handed his license back to him and remembered Tracy's photograph. She dug it out of her purse and handed it

to him hesitantly.

"I wasn't sure, but I thought you might like to have this."

He looked at the picture for a long time, completely silent.

"Vachon?" Natalie said finally.

He touched his fingertips to the image, as if hoping that by doing so he could somehow feel her. She hoped she hadn't upset him.

"Thank you," he whispered finally. "This means a lot to me, Natalie."

And it was then that she knew why it was so important to him that he help her find Nick.

He knew what it was to lose someone without the chance to say good-bye.

Fifteen

Maybe Vachon just liked flying on airplanes, but his enthusiasm for air travel was infectious.

She had always thought flying was boring, except for the occasional will-we-get-airborne-before-the-runway-ends? takeoff or slam-dunk landing. But Vachon noticed everything—the wind direction, the position of the flaps, the rpm of the engines, the creak of the landing gear—and he delighted in every minute of it. She found it hard to believe he'd lived through a horrifying plane crash without suffering any apparent trauma whatsoever.

"This is one of the best things about living a long time," he told her when they were finally in the air en route from Toronto to Atlanta. "When I was—" he checked to make sure no one heard him— "mortal, you could be burned as a witch for even suggesting it was possible to do this." He looked out the window and sighed. "I remember the first airplanes, with the open cockpit and the engine right in your face. What a kick in the ass that was."

"But you can fly, anyway . . . You don't need a plane." Natalie was careful to keep her voice down.

"I know. But it's not the same . . . Did you see the movie *Top Gun*? I could fly those jets. Any vampire—a *fledgling* vampire—could do that. But," he sighed, "I'll never get the chance."

Abruptly the focus of his attention shifted to the contents of the seat pocket in front of him. There was the usual: the airline's magazine, a diagram of the exits, an airsick bag. He started reading the emergency landing instructions.

"Worried?" she asked him.

"About what?"

"Well, if I had survived a major airline disaster, I don't think I'd be as calm as you are."

"Oh, that. I don't remember any of it. The explosion must have knocked me out. One moment I was in the plane, the next I was waking up on the ground." He shrugged. "I never had the chance to be scared . . ." He gave her a thoughtful look. "I hope it was like that for everyone else."

She nodded, thinking of Schanke and Cohen. "So do I."

He leaned forward to put the card back into the pocket and froze. From the look on his face, Natalie couldn't tell if he was sick, or hallucinating again, or suffering a sudden attack of post-traumatic stress or what.

"Vachon? What's the matter?"

He turned his head slowly until he was almost staring at the back of his seat. His voice was just above a whisper. "There's another vampire on the plane. I just felt it."

She looked around, not knowing what it was she was looking for. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. And if I know he's here, he knows I'm here . . ." She got the vaguest hint that there was something else he wasn't telling her, but he brushed the whole thing off. "Maybe it's just a coincidence."

Maybe it was. The other vampire never revealed himself.

The Atlanta airport was busy, even though it was the middle of the night. It was also huge, and they discovered that getting to the correct gate for their connecting red-eye flight to Albuquerque required a substantial hike. Natalie had had the foresight to arrange for a wheelchair, but Vachon gave her a "no way" look for her trouble. She piled their carry-on baggage in it, instead. Some people noticed that walking was difficult for him and stared, and she could tell that bothered him. For him, the trek through the airport might as well have been a marathon, but it wasn't until after six gates and two concourses, with twenty-six gates left to go, that he finally surrendered and sat in the chair.

Once on board the west-bound plane, he collapsed in his seat, totally exhausted. He was asleep before they were off the ground.

Natalie looked around but did not recognize any of the passengers from the previous flight, not that she would know the other vampire when she saw him, anyway. After a few minutes, she had put him completely out of her mind.

Thanks to a two-hour time zone difference, they arrived at their hotel in Albuquerque well before dawn. Natalie hoped it was just her imagination, but Vachon didn't look as well as he had a few hours before. He was extremely susceptible to any kind of infection, she knew, but she had hoped he would survive his brief exposure to the world outside of her apartment without picking up anything. Still, dragging him onto two airliners with questionably filtered air, and through a crowded international airport had been asking for trouble. He insisted he was fine, however, so she was willing to put it down to jet lag.

Natalie had requested adjoining rooms, and she had brought along the necessary materials to cover the windows. She left specific instructions that they were not to be disturbed by the housekeeping staff during the day, and for the amount of money they were paying for the rooms, she fully intended to raise hell if the instructions weren't followed.

At around 8:30 a.m., after a brief nap, she took the hotel's courtesy van to pick up the rental car she had reserved, a windowless dark grey 4-wheel drive with the rear seat removed. Such a specific request had cost her a great deal extra, but since they were making their foray into the desert at night, she selected a color least likely to be noticed. And the

lack of windows was a precaution against them not getting back to a safe place before dawn.

She obtained a detailed map of New Mexico as well as directions to the nearest Wal-Mart, where she purchased 50+ sunblock and a heavy tarp to protect Vachon if it became necessary. She also found ice for the large Coleman cooler in which she had packed Vachon's food supply after pouring it into freezer bags. The bags had still been frozen solid when she had checked them upon arriving at the hotel. She'd removed three of them so they'd thaw out by the time Vachon woke up. He also had a couple of bags in his backpack, in case the airline had somehow lost the cooler. Natalie had been holding her breath that that wouldn't happen—she had no idea how she would find blood for him in a strange city.

She got back to the hotel, ready to crash for the remainder of the day, but her intuition told her to open the door between her room and Vachon's and check on him.

He was still asleep, but his breathing was shallow and raspy. She didn't like the sound of it. She approached the bed and put her hand to the side of his face. His skin was not as cool as it should have been.

Still, he seemed to be sound asleep and not uncomfortable. She left him alone, but kept the door open between the two rooms just in case.

It was still daylight when she woke up again, but Vachon slept well past sundown. She took advantage of the time in between to get some dinner in the hotel restaurant, a welcome break from the junk food she'd snacked on for the past twenty-four-plus hours.

Vachon was in the shower when she got back. He'd already fed, and left the empty bags in assorted locations around the room. It wouldn't be a good idea to leave them for someone to find.

She was rinsing the last traces of blood out of them in her bathroom sink when he snuck up behind her.

"Vachon!"

"Sorry . . . Did you get everything?"

"Yes. Did you take your medicine?"

"Why do you always ask me that?"

"Because half the time the answer is 'no'."

"Well, I did," he answered, and then coughed and sneezed at the same time.

That made her turn around and look at him, concerned. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He wasn't lying, but she couldn't tell if he meant he felt well, or merely that he didn't feel bad.

She felt his forehead. "You've got a fever."

"Natalie, don't worry about me. No matter what it is, I'll live."

Her misgivings multiplied when he walked away from her limping. Not the odd, awkward way of walking he'd adapted, but actually looking like it caused him pain.

"What's the matter with your legs?"

"They hurt."

He didn't argue with her when she told him to take off his jeans, perhaps because at some point, he had decided to start wearing something underneath them.

She examined his legs. The were tight and sore, and his knees and ankles were red and painful. Her initial diagnosis was that the long walk at the airport had overstressed his weakened muscles and unstable joints, and that was no doubt part of it. But the inflammation was evident in his fingers, wrists, elbows and shoulders, too. It had come on so suddenly that she suspected some kind of septic arthritis, but what organism could have possibly caused it, she had no idea.

"I've got some disgusting, mortal disease, don't I?" he asked her finally.

"Apparently so, but I'd have to take out the textbooks to tell you which one." She didn't have a thermometer, but his temperature did not seem to be more than a couple of degrees above normal. Still, she started rummaging through her purse to see what she could give him for pain and fever. She found Motrin, which she sometimes needed when her bad knee flared up. It would work if he were human, but she'd never tried over-the-counter pain medication on one of Them.

Vachon declined the offer when she explained she didn't know how he'd react to it. He slowly pulled his jeans back on.

"It might help," she pointed out. She could see that his discomfort was more than he would admit.

"I feel okay, and right now, I can think straight. That's all I need." He fumbled with the snap on his jeans.

"Maybe we should wait, let you have tonight to rest."

"No, I want to go out there and at least take a look at the place." He gave her an affectionate peck on the cheek. "Don't worry about me, Natalie. Divia taught me what 'pain' means, and this is nothing."

❑❑❑❑❑

Three hours later, they were looking out over a moonlit landscape that looked to Natalie like the surface of another planet.

Frothy black rocks jutted skyward in all directions, most of them looking like daggers. The sparse vegetation was equally hostile, mostly cactus. There were signs warning people not to walk on the lava formation, explaining that, in many places, it was little more than a thin, easily fractured layer concealing deep depressions in the rock, and the result could be a nasty, possibly fatal, fall. Signs also cautioned that rattlesnakes nested in the many cracks and crevices, or sunned themselves on flat surfaces. Still others politely informed those who ignored the other warnings that the State of New Mexico was not responsible if they ended up injured, lost, poisoned or dead. There was even a yellow road crossing sign with a tarantula on it.

Vehicles were not allowed on the Malpais, but Natalie doubted that even a tank could get across the terrain, it was that rugged. It was a testimony to sheer human determination that Hwy 380 had ever been cut through it.

They pulled onto the narrow, often non-existent, road shoulder about twenty-five feet from the green highway sign that said "Entering Lincoln County."

Natalie wore heavy hiking boots, but could still feel the sharp volcanic cinders through the thick, rubber soles. A second too late, she realize that walking on the uneven surface had to be hell for Vachon. He tripped and fell full-length on the jagged little rocks.

She carefully helped him to his feet. She knew his knees and elbows already hurt, and having pointed little objects forced up against them could not have been fun. He'd scraped the heels of both hands raw, too. She used a Kleenex to wipe the blood off.

"Guess we should have brought the rollerblading pads," he said.

"Would you have worn them?"

He smiled. "No."

After that, she held onto his arm to steady him. She didn't care if he wanted her help or not, and didn't ask his permission.

The darkness of the place seemed to suck in the beam from her flashlight.

"This is worse than I thought, Vachon."

He scratched at a spot on the base of his neck and sniffled. "I'm afraid you're right."

"Want to go back and reconsider?"

"No. We're here. Let's do what we came to do."

She returned to the car for his backpack, into which she placed the tarp, the sunscreen, and two frozen bags of blood. She also retrieved the two pairs of leather work gloves and the first aid kit she'd brought along. She removed a couple of gauze pads to cover the scrapes from his fall.

When she got back to him, she noticed him scratching again.

"What's making you itch?" she asked him, and without waiting for an answer, she pulled his hand away and looked with her flashlight. Just below his collar bone was what looked like a mosquito bite, although it was too late in the year for that.

"What is it?" he asked her.

"It looks like something bit you. How long have you had that?"

He shrugged. "A few days."

"Well, I suppose if it hasn't killed you by now, it won't."

The pack did not weigh that much, but when she slipped it onto his shoulders, he winced and stumbled backwards.

"Is it too heavy? Are you going to be able to fly with it?"

"I'm just a little sore. It's okay."

She positioned the gauze over the abrasions on his palms and then slipped his gloves onto his hands, carefully easing them over the inflamed joints.

"How will you know when you've gone three miles?" she wanted to know.

He shrugged. "I'll just know, the same way I'll know which way is south . . . It's a vampire thing."

She tugged the straps on his pack. "You'll be able to get this off if you have to?"

"Yes. Will you be okay here by yourself?"

They both knew what he was talking about. The place was, in a word, spooky.

"As long as my flashlight doesn't go out."

She smoothed the hair back from his face. "Be careful," she told him.

"Yeah." He smiled at her, then looked skyward and was gone.

Natalie knew that if anyone noticed the car, they'd be curious. She decided to wait out in the open, after leaving a note on the windshield saying that the car had run out of gas, and that someone would be coming to get it as soon as possible. She hoped this would satisfy any would-be good Samaritans, and at the same time crossed her fingers that she wasn't offering an open invitation to someone to strip it clean or steal it.

She found a crevice that appeared to be unoccupied and was large enough for her to hide in if she spotted the headlights of an oncoming car.

Then, the waiting began.

❑❑❑❑❑

Natalie concealed the beam of her flashlight when she saw headlights approaching. She remained hidden when two men exited a white pick-up and began examining the car. They spoke Spanish, but from their tone of voice, they seemed to be questioning what the vehicle was doing there. One of them found the note on the windshield and showed it to his companion. A few more words were exchanged and they replaced the note and drove off.

She looked at her watch. It was only 11:47. Vachon had been gone just over an hour.

Two more cars drove right on by. A third drove past and then reversed to come back. That time, a man and a woman checked the car out, then left. Natalie wished there was somewhere to park the thing so it couldn't be seen, but there just wasn't.

She also wished she'd thought to bring a thermos of coffee. The desert night air was becoming chilly. At least there were a couple of candy bars in her backpack. She took one out and unwrapped it, then looked at her watch again. 1:12.

How fast did vampires fly, anyway?

And what if Vachon had found LaCroix, and LaCroix wasn't in the mood to be found? LaCroix had no qualms about mistreating Nick, his own vampire child. Would he have any reservations about taking his anger or annoyance out on Vachon?

Vachon would be defenseless.

Why had she let him go?

Thinking about what might have happened to the vampire, she wasn't able to finish the candy bar. She tucked it back into the backpack next to Vachon's Dilantin. He'd miss the second dose, but he was forgetful, and often did that anyway.

2:02 a.m. She got up to stretch her legs and looked out on the vast expanse of black rock, geological devastation as far as the eye could see. *Must have been one hell of an eruption.*

At 3:15, a state trooper pulled up. Natalie listened as he ran a make on the rental car. She breathed a sigh of relief when he didn't call for a tow truck, and instead only made a note of the vehicle's location to his dispatcher.

At 6:17, dawn woke her up. It took her a moment to remember where she was, and only an instant longer to realize that Vachon had never come back.

Sixteen

Vachon fought his way back to awareness, the Vampire voice inside of him screaming at him that daylight was coming.

He wanted to stay unconscious. He felt better that way. But the sun was coming up. He *had* to wake up, had to try to ignore the fiery pain in his left side, had to find somewhere to hide . . .

He touched where it hurt the most. He wasn't bleeding anymore, but it was still there.

Stupid, stupid, pendejo, stupid!

He should have known LaCroix would not leave his front door wide open.

He had no doubt that the booby trap was meant as a warning to their kind—that it was unlikely that a human on foot would ever have tripped it off, only something flying over it, bigger than a bird and close to the ground. Like a vampire.

If he'd still been able to see and move like a vampire, the three steel bolts from the three camouflaged launchers would have missed him, only letting him know he was not welcome there.

But only one had missed. Another had gone straight through his thigh and the third was stuck in his side.

The projectiles had sent him pummeling from the sky with enough force to knock him out.

Now, he was going to not-so-spontaneously combust if he didn't move his ass to someplace safe.

He really did *not* need this crap.

He remembered the tarp in his backpack, but that ray of hope was extinguished when he discovered that the pack was skewered by the steel rod sticking out of his back.

He couldn't get it off, he couldn't reach it, and he didn't have the strength in his hands to grip the bolt and pull it out.

Shit!

The exertion made him cough, which opened up whole new horizons of pain. The damn thing must have gone through his lung.

He was sick, too. Natalie had warned him he was susceptible to human diseases. She hadn't told him he could come down with a dozen of them all at once.

Well, crying over it wasn't going to do any good.

He looked around, thinking it would be nice if his eyesight was better than it was.

Finally, he spotted a deep recess in the craggy rock and dragged himself to it. He fit into it nicely, but discovered that the bottom surface sloped at a perilous angle. He tried, but couldn't find a way to anchor himself. If he fell asleep, or had a seizure, he'd slide right out into the sunlight.

He'd have to force himself to stay awake all day. It was something he had never done before.

He started to think of Divia. If she wasn't already dead, he'd be thinking of ways to kill her for making him like this. Maybe pay a mortal to roast her a little bit at a time through a magnifying glass. Or stake her in a nice shaded spot where she would slowly turn to ashes as the sun rose. Or maybe just drop her into a volcano. He'd get close to one for that.

He asked himself why she had done this to him. He didn't know her and had certainly never done anything to her, yet she had left him half-crazy, incapacitated and in incredible pain. If he had angered her, or had something that she wanted, maybe he would have been able to understand, but she had done this to him just because she was mean, and he happened to be there.

He wondered if he could have saved Urs if Divia hadn't attacked him first. He knew he could have saved Tracy.

Nick could have saved Tracy, damn him. Why did he listen to Natalie? . . . But he knew the answer to that. He listened to her because he loved her.

Ironically, he was able to forgive Natalie for Tracy's death. He had tasted in her blood the depth of her sorrow and regret for the fact that she had stopped Nick from bringing her across, and knew it was a heavy burden that she would carry with her forever.

Not that that left her completely off the hook . . .

Thinking of people—living, dead and undead—who pissed him off occasionally kept him awake when he actually wanted to sleep. In five hundred years, there had to have been enough of them that if he counted them all, it might take all day. The list started with Eduardo Ramirez, who had knocked out his front teeth in a fistfight over the stolen affections of Esperanza Zaragosa, the first woman he had ever loved. True, the three of them were only six years old at the time, but some things just could not be forgiven. Maybe by the time he got to that little Whore of Satan, Divia, not to mention LaCroix whom he had to thank for his current deplorable situation, and Nick Knight, for letting Tracy die, and Natalie, for dragging him out here in the first place, it would be dark . . .

❑❑❑❑❑

Natalie knew Vachon was either with LaCroix, or hiding himself from the daylight, or he was dead.

It would be insane to go looking for him.

But the thought that at that very moment he might be smoldering in the sunlight sickened her.

How long did it take Them to die that way? Was it quick? Or did they endure the unimaginable horror of being slowly cooked alive?

She was dressed for hiking—sturdy boots, heavy jeans, a denim shirt and jacket, leather gloves. She had brought along sunglasses and sunscreen, too.

She looked out over the rugged landscape. It would be work, but she could do it. Three miles wasn't that far.

After two hours, the car was just a dot behind her. She took some gauze from the first aid kit and tied it to a tall cactus so she'd continue to have a reference point.

Her knee was killing her. Climbing up and down uneven rocks was not something her legs were conditioned for, anyway.

She was thankful it wasn't the middle of summer. As it was, she had gotten hot enough to shed her jacket and roll up the sleeves on her shirt.

She snickered, thinking of the casual remarks made about dry heat being more comfortable than humid heat. No one ever mentioned that dry air sucked the moisture right out of your body. You didn't even need to sweat first. She had already consumed almost half of the water she had with her.

If she didn't find Vachon soon, she'd have to return to the car and come back at night, when she'd be completely unable to negotiate the treacherous rocks. Her only hope would be that she'd find him waiting for her when she returned to that spot after sundown.

She had just decided not to think about him being dead when the world fell out from under her.

In one of those instants where a dozen thoughts flood the brain circuits at once, she recalled in vivid detail the warning about sink holes, just before she hit . . . what? The ground? No, she was below the surface . . .

The fall dazed her, but as she gradually regained her senses, she realized she wasn't hurt. She'd been holding her backpack in front of her and it had taken most of the impact. A few shards of volcanic rock from the ruptured surface had fallen with her and given her some minor cuts, and she was sure to have bruises galore to show for the fall, but she was okay. She hadn't hit her head. No difficulty breathing. No signs of impending shock or pain from internal bleeding. No fractured limbs.

She sat up and tried to assess her situation.

She was surrounded by foamy black rock, as if she'd popped a huge bubble and fallen into it. She was about fifteen feet below the surface, in a hole with almost spherical sides.

There was no way out, and nobody knew she was there.

❑❑❑❑❑

Vachon was hot, and hungry, and sick. The steel arrow felt like a branding iron in his side, it hurt so much, but at least it kept him awake. The intensity of the daylight burned his eyes, even if he kept them closed. His skin was not smoldering in the protection of his dark little crevice, but he knew he was getting the vampire equivalent of a sunburn.

And he was so sleepy.

He tried to remember if he'd ever felt so totally wretched. Crossing the ocean as a mortal, he'd been sick most of the way—seasickness, dysentery, infected sores from wearing clothes that were saturated with salt—but at least he'd had plenty of company in his misery. And when his kind had fallen victim to the mysterious Fever, at least he'd had his own clean, comfortable bed to suffer in, and Tracy by his side. Tracy had been there to ease the agony of Divia's attack, too.

Tracy . . .

Go ahead, Jav, start thinking about Tracy and make yourself depressed on top of everything else . . .

He could hear the rattlesnakes. They were probably looking for him just to bite him. He'd been bitten by a rattlesnake in 1882. It had taken him only two hours to recover, but he didn't care to repeat the experience.

He wanted nothing more than to close his eyes, sleep and be rid of the pain for awhile. His side hurt, and forcing his aching joints to maintain the cramped position he was in was pure torture. He was sweating, and that was making the bite on his neck itch mercilessly. The more he scratched it, the further the itch spread.

Every time he nodded off, he felt himself sliding and had to force himself awake.

Dammit, he was *not* going to die in the sun after all the work he'd put into staying alive.

❑❑❑❑❑

Natalie looked in her backpack to see what she had, and how long it would last her.

The first thing she discovered was that the bottle of Dilantin had broken and it was all over everything else in the pack. Luckily, it hadn't had a chance to soak into the candy bars. She wouldn't have been able to eat them safely if it had.

Well, the first thing she'd have to do was get the prescription refilled. Abruptly discontinuing the drug was dangerous to mortals, and there was no reason to think it wouldn't be to Vachon, also.

No, that wasn't the first thing she had to do. The first thing she had to do was get out of there.

The pack also contained her jacket, the first aid kit, the sunscreen, her flashlight (but the extra batteries were in the car), and half a bottle of water. That was it.

She'd use the contents of the first aid kit to clean and bandage the injuries she had sustained in the fall, but first she removed a roll of gauze and tied one end of it through a buttonhole on her jacket. She unwound the gauze and then tossed the jacket out of the hole. Maybe someone would see it in the daylight, and if she was still there come night fall, she would use the gauze to pull it back down.

Even though there was nothing to do, she could not sit and do nothing. She picked up a piece of the broken pharmacy bottle and scratched it along the wall of her prison.

The lava was soft. Maybe even softer than the heavy piece of glass . . .

If she worked at it, maybe she could carve foot—and hand-holds in the rock and climb out . . .

She knew that was a stupid idea. She would eventually be trying to stand in and cling to these holds while digging at the rock with one free hand, on a surface that was anything but vertical. And how long would it take? Probably a lot longer than her water would hold out.

But she couldn't sit there and not try. That wasn't her.

She picked up the biggest piece of glass she could find and started scraping.

❑❑❑❑❑

Vachon could think just clearly enough to be aware of two things: Pain and Darkness. The sun was gone. He could sleep now, if he didn't hurt so much.

He slid down out of his hiding place, but he wasn't able to move. His joints and muscles were locked in place, his skin

was blistered from the sun, and he was just too weak from sickness and hunger.

The piece of metal still pierced his side and made it hard to breathe.

He wasn't going anywhere. But maybe if he could sleep . . .

Then what? Maybe he could find the strength to crawl back into his hole for another day? And the day after that?

Even if he'd been able to fly, he couldn't see. The daylight had almost blinded him.

His only hope was that Natalie would look for him, but she wouldn't be able to spot him at night, and in the daylight he'd be hidden from view . . .

Better not to think about that now. He was too tired . . .

Behind him, he heard the crunching sound that the sharp little cinders made when they were stepped on. He couldn't lift his head to turn around and look, but then he heard the sound again and again. Footsteps.

He felt the vampire. The same one he'd sensed on the plane. He didn't know whether to be afraid or relieved.

This same vampire sensed him more strongly than any other vampire could, he knew. And he, in return, knew him by the invisible but undeniable bloodlink they shared.

He could only see shadows, but he knew when the other vampire was kneeling beside him.

He knew The Inca wouldn't hurt him, not in this condition. If there was one thing their master had passed on to them both, it was a sense of fair play.

But, he might just leave him there.

He squinted his eyes, trying to make out the look on his twin's face to see what he might be thinking, but it was useless.

"I need help," he admitted finally.

"So I see . . . This will hurt."

The Inca gave him no time to question that statement. He grabbed the steel shaft stuck in his side and yanked it out.

Vachon screamed, and then made several genetically impossible references to the other vampire's ancestry.

"Shut up," the Inca told him. "You talk too much."

The routine scenario for their encounters would ordinarily have had them beating the hell out of each other by this point, so Vachon was surprised to find himself being lifted off the ground more gently than he probably deserved. A moment later, they were airborne.

Vachon didn't know where they were going, but he knew he was safe, for now. He let himself drift off to sleep.

❑❑❑❑❑

Natalie had forced herself to consume no more than the half-eaten candy bar and a third of the water she had left. Her stomach ached with hunger, and she could think of nothing but how she had taken the convenient faucet on her kitchen sink for granted. Slow dehydration was a terrible way to die.

She had pulled her jacket down and put it on, and in the dark continued to scrape at the rock. She had two good holes after a day's work, but the glass had been worn down a mere sliver.

She tried not to see things in the shadows, because she dared not turn on her flashlight and use up the scant power that remained in the batteries. Did snakes and tarantulas crawl around at night? She'd need it to use as a signal if a miracle should happen and an aircraft should fly overhead, or someone should come walking by. *Fat chance of that!*

The flashlight was tucked away in her backpack out of reach when something *big* dropped down into the hole with her. She let out an involuntary shriek before she was able to make out the outline of a man.

No, of course it wasn't a man. It was a vampire. She knew that instinctively, even though all she could see was his silhouette. The long hair, the slender, wiry form . . .

"Vachon?"

"No," came the reply. "Come with me." He was extending his hand.

To take it without knowing who he was or what he wanted was foolhardy, but if given the choice of a nice, quick draining by a hungry vampire, and slowly turning into a piece of human jerky, she'd take her chances with the vampire.

She reached out to him, and in a breathtaking instant was swept into his arms, and then into the night sky.

The flight was short, but Natalie had never experienced anything like it.

Oh, if she could have flown with Nick!

The arms of the vampire who held her were strong, secure, but impersonal. He wasn't going to kill her. He would have done that where he found her, and no one would have discovered her body for months, maybe years. Maybe never. No, he was taking her somewhere, and until she found out where, she let herself enjoy this experience.

So astonishing was it that when they finally landed, she was scarcely breathing.

The vampire looked at her, and she knew the look on her face had to be one of utter awe and elation.

She saw him smile in the moonlight. Not Vachon, but she'd seen him before . . . at the precinct, after the plane crash . . .

"I am the Inca," he said, at the same instant she figured that out.

"Yes, I remember you . . . Don't you have a name?"

"Of course. Most vampires have many names."

"But you don't go around calling yourself 'the Inca' all the time, do you?"

"No."

"What does Vachon call you?"

"*Chinche*."

"That's a nice . . ."

"It means a bug."

"Oh. I take it you don't go by that, either."

He cocked his head to one side, exactly the same way Vachon did, and smiled. "The mortal name I was given was 'Amaru'. It is still the name I prefer."

"Amaru," Natalie repeated.

He indicted that she should follow him. "This way."

There was an opening in the lava. In the dark she didn't see it until the vampire disappeared into it, tugging her along behind him. Beyond it was a passageway that was completely dark. She hesitated, intimidated by the blackness of it.

"Do not be afraid," the vampire said softly. "I can see. Let me lead you."

They made a 90-degree turn and she saw a tiny light in the distance. When they reached it, there was a steel door with a security camera above it.

The Inca didn't knock or press any buttons. He just stood there, but after a few seconds the door opened.

On the other side was a spacious room, elegantly furnished. A large area of it was lower than the rest, and appeared to serve as a living room, with three couches and the biggest TV screen she'd ever seen. There was a large kitchen area, and a spot that was furnished with a desk, bookshelves and a computer. The space was twice the size of her entire apartment.

There was a heavy metal door to the right of the entryway, another door off of the office space, and a dark hallway leading out of the kitchen, which suggested there was even more to this underground dwelling.

She was about to ask the Inca where they were when the door in the office space opened up.

LaCroix emerged with a coffee mug in his hand and shut the door behind him. Natalie had the fleeting thought that a cup of coffee would be nice right then, but she knew that wasn't what he had in the mug.

The tall, blond vampire nodded curtly in her direction. "Dr. Lambert."

She nodded back, not sure what to say now. It was obvious neither of the two vampires were going to open the conversation.

"Vachon was with me. We got separated. Do you know . . . ?"

"He is here," LaCroix said in that Nightcrawler voice of his.

Natalie couldn't read exactly what he meant from the tone of his voice, and that scared her.

"What have you done with him?" She sounded more hostile than she intended, but the last thing she wished was to appear vulnerable in front of LaCroix, so she didn't rephrase the question.

LaCroix looked at her with a lifted eyebrow. "I fed him and gave him a place to rest. What did you think I would do with him?"

He wasn't insulted. He was amused. Damn him!

Their eyes met, but LaCroix made no further comment other than to say, "You must be hungry, too. Come. Eat."

Surprisingly, there was real food on hand. Not a lot of it, and it was all canned, but she was hungry enough to eat almost anything. She selected a can of corned beef hash and another of canned spaghetti. Normally, she would have found both totally disgusting, but after more than twenty-four hours without food, she could hardly wait for LaCroix to warm them in the microwave.

He couldn't find a can opener, so he ripped the lids off the cans easily with his fingernails. He scooped the contents onto a plate and as they heated, he explained that he preferred that the occasional carpenter or electrician or painter whose services were required not leave the premises until the job was done, so sometimes it was necessary that he feed them.

"They are brought out here at night, via a most . . . circuitous route. I pay them well, so they don't ask questions, and I prefer they have as little opportunity as possible to recall how to find this place again."

He set the plate before her. "I'm afraid all I can offer you to drink is water."

"Water is great." She dug into her food like a lumberjack.

She had dozens of questions she would/could/should ask him, but she'd think better on a full stomach.

Her first question was, "LaCroix, what are you doing out here? It must have cost a fortune to build this place."

He joined her at the table with a pitcher of water, and poured a glass for her. "A small one, yes, although not by today's standards. I had it built almost forty years ago, as a bomb shelter."

Natalie stopped her fork for just a moment. "Bomb shelter?"

"It was the '50s," he sighed. "And not even vampires know the effects of a thermonuclear detonation. Some theorized that radiation would affect us much the same as sunlight, and we would perish. Like so many mortals, I feared for the safety of my . . . family."

"Nick and Janette?"

"And others. A hundred vampires could have survived here, had it been necessary."

She gulped down all of the water in her glass, so he refilled it and continued, "This place is almost as remote now as it was then. It was the logical place to bring Nicholas after . . . what happened in Toronto . . ."

Despite her hunger, Natalie's stomach lurched. "What did happen, LaCroix? Tell me."

Seventeen

He told her everything, and the story angered, fascinated and repulsed her.

According to LaCroix, Nick had drained her beyond her capacity to recover unless she was brought across. "But when that choice came, he could not do it. He could not make you what he is. So," he said casually, "he chose death for you."

Natalie's emotions were in turmoil. Why had Nick wanted her to die? He would have brought Tracy Vetter across if she hadn't stopped him. Why Tracy and not her?

And why was she hurt and angry about it now? Did she even want to be a vampire? She asked herself that, and found that the answer didn't matter. What mattered was that Nick had left her to die, exactly as she had feared.

But, obviously, she wasn't dead, so what had happened?

"But, I'm alive . . . How . . . ?"

"Nicholas wanted to die with you," LaCroix explained. "He asked me to kill him." For the briefest instant, a look of intense pain flashed across his face.

"You couldn't do it," Natalie stated.

"No." He looked at her, his face still unrevealing, but his eyes betraying his emotion. "And when the choice became mine to make, I could not let you die, either. Nicholas loves you, and I . . . love him. I couldn't do that to him. Not again. Not this time."

His voice became devoid of emotion again as he recounted the details. He had incapacitated Nick with a blow to the head and then had opened Nick's wrist himself, so that he could give her Nick's blood.

"It is my belief that his blood is the only thing that saved you."

"But I didn't come across . . ."

LaCroix's expression became troubled. "I know. It didn't work the way it should have, and I don't know why."

Natalie's heart leaped. She thought of Janette, and how her passion for a mortal had freed her from the vampire within her. Had Nick . . .

"I know what you are thinking," LaCroix said gently. He shook his head. "Nicholas is not mortal. Sometimes," he sighed, "I don't think there is any human left in him at all anymore."

Natalie thought that should have made LaCroix happy, but the sadness in his voice gave her a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

She didn't know what to ask him next. She wanted to know if Nick was there, yet at the same time, she didn't feel ready to face him, not after what LaCroix had just told her.

She finished her meal, and decided to avoid the issue for now.

"Where is Vachon? Can I see him?"

He seemed relieved at the change of subject. "Of course."

He led her through the door he had walked through after she had arrived, the one off the study area.

Beyond it was a tiny room. A bed, a small dresser and a chair was all it had room for.

Vachon's clothes were piled on the floor. A crisp white sheet covered him, clean except for a small blood stain.

Natalie lifted it and saw the wound on his side. She also saw he was burned. Not badly, but extensively. His eyes fluttered open for a moment. He recognized her, smiled, and was out again. She asked LaCroix what had happened.

He told her about the perimeter defenses.

"What the hell do you need that for? You could have killed him!"

LaCroix was taken aback by her tone of voice.

"My dear Dr. Lambert, if I had wanted to kill him, I would have used wood. Steel won't kill a vampire. And besides, he should have been able to remove it. He should have healed in a few minutes."

"Well, he didn't, and he isn't going to."

Vachon was feverish, his breathing was congested, and he had the look she'd seen before, the one that told her he was in pain even asleep. There was a patch of inflamed skin on his neck, and she immediately checked for fang marks. She didn't trust LaCroix as far as she could throw him. But on closer examination, she saw that the insect bite was apparently causing a rather pronounced, if localized, allergic reaction. It looked like he'd been scratching at it continuously.

She slumped into the chair beside the bed. She felt like she was starting all over with him, not to mention that the fact he was off the Dilantin cold-turkey was weighing on her mind.

"It was only a warning." LaCroix sounded almost apologetic. "I didn't know it was him."

"It's my fault, too," she sighed. "I shouldn't have brought him out here. He wasn't ready. He's too . . . fragile."

LaCroix sat down on the bed, so carefully Vachon didn't stir. He nodded at the younger vampire. "I was surprised to see him. I honestly thought he was dead."

"I don't know why he isn't. You can't imagine what he's been through . . . How did he get here?"

LaCroix nodded towards the Inca, who stood silently in a corner, his arms folded across his chest. "In the same manner in which you arrived."

Natalie turned to the other vampire. "How did you know to look for us?"

The Inca shrugged, and he did it exactly the same way Vachon did. "I followed you from Toronto."

"You were there? When? How long . . . ?"

"When he was hurt, I was half a world away, but still, I felt his pain. He thought he was dying, but he didn't really know what had been done to him. Then, I felt the exact moment that the stake was driven through his heart.

"These things told me he was dead, and yet a part of me could still feel him," the vampire explained. "I sensed a blackness surrounding him, and his fear became my own. I had to understand it. I had to know what had happened to him. By the time I found him, he was with you. You did what you could, and I did what was needed to help."

"The blood. You arranged for that?"

He nodded. She remembered how none of Vachon's belongings had been disturbed at the church. That had probably been the Inca's doing, too.

And of course, he had also been the vampire on the plane. Vachon had known that.

"He is very ill, and so weak . . ." LaCroix commented, looking at Vachon again.

Natalie nodded. "He's better than he was, but I don't know if he'll ever recover completely. There was just too much damage."

"I can scarcely feel the vampire in him."

"It's there. He's a vampire in a body that is less than mortal. I can't even pretend to know what that must be like."

"Was it Divia who did this to him?"

"Yes. Somehow, she poisoned him. I haven't figured out how it was done."

LaCroix took a deep breath. He knew something about what had happened to Vachon, something he wasn't telling.

"What is it, LaCroix?"

He shook his head. "Even if you knew, it wouldn't help him."

"Tell me, anyway. I'll decide that."

He hesitated several seconds. His eyes closed as if recalling a painful memory.

Finally, he spoke. "Are you familiar with an ancient practice called venification?"

"No," Natalie said truthfully. "I've never heard of it."

"It is a process by which a child—most often a girl—is converted into the perfect assassin. It begins at birth."

"They are trained to kill?!"

"Oh, no, my dear. It's much more insidious than that. The mother or wet-nurse is fed poison in minute doses so that the child receives it at the breast. After it is weaned, the amount is increased. Never enough to kill the child, or even make it seriously ill. Not usually, anyway. But year by year, a little more is given, a little at a time. By the time the child reaches puberty, its body fluids are so saturated, they are lethal."

"That's impossible . . ."

"No, it is simply no longer heard of. I assure you, it *is* possible."

Natalie then realized what he was trying to tell her. "Divia?! Your own daughter?!"

He nodded grimly. "At the right age, these children, these veneficas, are presented to the intended victim, either as a gift, or as a wife or prostitute. Nature is simply allowed to take its course, and the man dies during the act, or immediately thereafter."

"That's the most cruel and barbaric thing I've ever heard of!"

He gave her a scornful look. "In that case, you have heard very little. I assure you, it's a better death than many of them deserve."

"But what about the children? What happens to them?"

"Obviously romance is out of the question." He snickered, for a moment living up to the image she had of him. "Although they usually die at quite a young age, anyway."

"How could you?! Your own child!"

"It was a different time, and those were different circumstances, and I never knew that I would . . . come to love her." He paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. "As it was, she was one of those unfortunates who was dying from the process itself when her master came to her. She knew this. I don't know if what had been done to her affected her mind in some way, or if her evil and hatred were born into her, but it was there. Always, I could see it, even when she was very small." He sighed heavily. "We had made her into something that was not human, and when she was brought across, she became something unique. She was not just a vampire. She was a greater evil, a demon incarnate. Her poison was physically magnified, so that she was able to visit death upon mortals just by her touch alone, and she was not content with inflicting horrifying physical pain.

"All vampires are able to shape the thoughts of most humans to some extent, and Divia could do this even with vampires. She had the ability to reach into the mind and flood it with her essence. They would experience her being from the inside, all the horrors she had been a party to, the atrocities. She would in turn derive pleasure from their suffering, seeking out the memory of the worst thing a person—or vampire—had ever experienced and making them relive it from the most terrifying perspective possible so that she could savor the evil . . . She was . . . quite talented . . ."

Natalie remembered what Vachon had told her about his hallucinations. "Vachon saw a child die by torture."

LaCroix closed his eyes briefly as if struck a blow. "And he re-experienced it as the child."

"How did you know?"

A small laugh. "I know Divia . . ." He continued, "Because her master had such power, and because this inhuman capacity to destroy was already an integral part of who she was, she became this *thing* that was beyond even the ability of her master to control. She might have destroyed us all, including me.

"I know how powerful she was." He shook his head. "I don't know how one as young as Vachon endured it."

He clasped one of Vachon's hands in his own. Natalie could have sworn there was a hint of affection in the gesture, but when he spoke, his tone was once again purely academic.

"A fascinating creature, don't you agree?" He referred to Vachon. "No guilt, no remorse, no conflicts about what he is. And yet something about him motivates you to help him regain an existence which you consider evil."

"He's not evil."

"But he is a vampire."

She saw what he was getting at. "He is what he is. I can accept that."

Another raised eyebrow. "Can you? Can you now?"

Before she could respond, both LaCroix and the Inca were suddenly alert, turning towards the doorway before Natalie even heard or saw anyone approach.

Then, he was right there in the room.

Those familiar deep blue-grey eyes darted from face to face, cold, like a snake's eyes, without the slightest hint of emotion, curiosity or even recognition. When they fixed on Natalie, they sent a chill down her spine, which was the last reaction she would have anticipated.

She rose slowly from her chair and took a tentative step towards him.

"Nick?"

Eighteen

Natalie's first instincts were to run to him and embrace him, but something in that stare of his stopped her in her tracks.

There was no response when she said his name. He just kept looking at her.

LaCroix was at his side in an instant.

"Nicholas, do you remember Natalie?"

Something was terribly wrong. LaCroix sounded like he was talking to a three-year-old, and Natalie didn't know what was worse, the fact that at first he got no reaction from Nick at all or that when he finally did, Nick hissed at her, his fangs bared.

LaCroix shook him, hard. "Stop it, Nicholas!"

Nick's gaze turned towards LaCroix, but there was nothing behind those blue eyes but a void.

The entire scene had not gone unnoticed by the Inca. Natalie saw his muscles tensed, the hint of gold in his eyes. He saw Nick as a threat, and he was prepared to fight.

LaCroix placed his hand on Nick's shoulder.

"Go, Nicholas. Nothing here concerns you."

Nick didn't move. He kept looking at Natalie, still no recognition, no feeling in those cold, cold eyes, only that reptilian glare.

"Go!" LaCroix barked.

Nick turned his eyes towards him, and then looked at the other two vampires, but his expression did not convey the slightest hint of interest in any of them. Without a word, he left.

Natalie moved to follow him, but LaCroix stopped her.

"Not yet, Dr. Lambert. We must talk, first."

The Inca stayed with Vachon, as if he had no intention of leaving his side. He was afraid of something. Was it that Nick would harm his defenseless twin? That was how it appeared to Natalie. What had the Inca sensed from Nick?

She followed LaCroix into the sunken living room. She hadn't seen it before, but the ceiling was glass, and the spectacular star-studded desert night sky was revealed when LaCroix used a remote to open the shutters that kept the daylight out. The view was exquisite.

She hadn't seen where Nick had gone, but he was nowhere in sight.

LaCroix beckoned her to one of the couches.

"You're limping," he noticed.

"It's my knee. It acts up once in awhile. Hiking across rocks didn't help."

He nodded as she sank into the comfortable sofa, glad to take the weight off her leg.

"No more small talk, LaCroix," she said. "What's wrong with Nick? What did you do to him?"

LaCroix gave her an ironic smile. "My dear, that is the second time you have asked me that. Why do you assume I wish to 'do' anything to anyone?"

"Because I know you."

"No, you do not. You know only what Nicholas has let you know."

He had her on that one, so she got back to the subject. "He didn't recognize me."

"Oh, I believe he did. Some part of him knew it was you."

Oddly, Natalie believed that, too, even though she'd seen no evidence to support that belief.

"You can't think something isn't wrong, LaCroix. He's like a robot, or a zombie. What on earth happened?"

LaCroix slumped forward. For an instant, he looked all of his two thousand years. When he looked up at her, the cocky, urbane facade had been stripped away. Underneath was a father who stood by while his child suffered, unable to ease the pain.

"Dr. Lambert, I have asked myself that same question many, many times."

The look on his face scared her more than the sight of Nick had. "How long has he been like this?"

"Since Toronto. Since the last night he spent with you . . . At first I thought perhaps it was just the shock of what had happened. He thought he had killed you, and that was just too much for him. I thought that if I could assure him you were alive, he would be fine, but there was no convincing him. He was then just as you saw him now. My words mean nothing to him."

"But just now, he did what you asked . . ."

"He understands my tone of voice, or the physical contact, that is all. I cannot talk to him."

Natalie's stomach was doing flip-flops. What could have done this?

"I do not want to believe he has gone mad . . . I have even considered the possibility that I hit him too hard and somehow damaged his brain, even though I know that's ridiculous. But what else can I think?

"He doesn't speak, and I don't know if it's that he can't or that he won't. If I did not see to it that he fed, I believe he would allow himself to starve. Books, movies, music . . . none of that interests him . . . He still paints. That is the only indication that my Nicholas is still there, somewhere inside that shell you saw."

A hundred thoughts raced through Natalie's mind at once, but finally, the physician in her allowed one to emerge above the others. "I want to examine him," she said.

"He won't let you. He won't let anyone but me touch him."

"Please, LaCroix. I have to try. Maybe I can help him. You don't want him to go on like that, do you?"

She expected another disdainful glare, but there was just that pained gaze. *He looks so <u>human</u>!*

"No. No, I do not."

She followed him through the steel door. On the other side was a maze of rooms, most with the doors closed.

The one they entered was large, paneled in oak. Half of the floor was maple, the other half covered by plush and expensive charcoal carpet. There was no furniture, just some pillows.

The walls were covered with what at first appeared to be sheets of colored canvas. However, when Natalie looked closely, she saw they were paintings. They were so very odd, all done in one color with only the direction of the brush strokes delineating the different components, sometimes down to painstakingly minute detail. They depicted scenes of death, destruction, and desolation. A blinding yellow sun radiated merciless heat on withered yellow wheat, a verdant jungle teemed with vicious green insects, a black pit swallowed a screaming black skull.

Natalie was no psychiatrist, but her first impression was that this was the work of a very troubled mind.

She had expected to find Nick standing at his easel, the way she had found him so many times alone in his apartment.

But he was sitting on the floor, a red canvas spread out before him. He had folded himself in half so that his face was up against the canvas as he concentrated on a tiny area with a paintbrush no bigger than a toothpick. Hunched over like he was, Natalie noticed the outline of his spine and shoulder blades, which in turn drew her attention to his arms, the only part of him not covered by clothing. How incredibly thin he was! Even Vachon, as sick as he had been, did not look like that.

He didn't appear to notice that either she or LaCroix had entered the room.

LaCroix said his name three times before he lifted his head, not to look at either of them, but just to stare directly ahead of him.

LaCroix's fingertips brushed against the wavy blond hair—longer now than Natalie had ever seen it.

"It is as if he does not see or hear or think," LaCroix said softly. "I don't know how to reach him."

Natalie knelt beside Nick, ignoring the pain that shot up from her knee as she did so.

"Nick? Can you hear me?"

He blinked, and for a moment there was a distant look in his eyes, but then he bent forward again and went back to his painting.

Natalie had to ask LaCroix, "How do you know that he's still a vampire?" *He's not even acting human.*

LaCroix smiled indulgently. "I feel the vampire in him. Very weak, like Vachon, but it is there. He still has certain instincts. He knew without being told that there were other vampires here this evening, and something inside of him was attracted to their presence. Ordinarily he does not leave this room without being coerced. And, of course, he still drinks blood."

"Have you tried anything else?" She tried not make that an accusation.

"Dr. Lambert, you are grasping at the proverbial straws. As I told you, he is not mortal. But yes, in desperation, I admit that I have. It is difficult to get him to feed, as you can see." He ran his hand over Nick's shoulders, where the bones were most prominent. "He has no interest in his own well-being, I'm afraid."

The clothing Nick wore were simple—a T-shirt and jogging pants—but they were clean and so was Nick. His hair was longer, but it wasn't dirty or tangled. If he wasn't taking care of himself, someone was doing a meticulous job of it for him. Was it LaCroix? It had to be.

She noticed how the old vampire looked at Nick and began to see him in a different light. What was it in his eyes she saw? Sorrow? Affection? Regret?

She turned her attention back to Nick. She tentatively reached out and put her hand on his shoulder. She could feel the joint where once there had been strong, powerful muscle.

He flinched at her touch, but didn't pull away immediately. Instead, he closed his eyes as if he were trying to see something hidden deep in his mind. Did he remember her? Her touch, her scent?

But just when she thought maybe he did, he pulled away with a vicious jerk.

When she tried to touch him again, he shielded his face as if expecting a blow.

"Enough!" LaCroix said softly, but sternly. He knelt beside Nick and put an arm across his shoulders. "It's all right Nicholas. We will go now."

That seemed to calm him instantly.

Even so, Natalie found it hard to believe that the Nick she knew wanted to be so completely alone.

"May I come back and see you again, Nick?" she asked him, as if she were speaking to a complete stranger, because in fact, she was.

Nick continued to look down at his painting, but after several seconds Natalie thought she saw a barely perceptible nod.

She looked at LaCroix. He'd seen it, too.

"Later, then—okay, Nick?"

This time, there was no response.

LaCroix stood up and helped her off the floor. Natalie tried to walk ahead of him. She was afraid she was going to cry, and she didn't want him to see it.

But he caught up to her easily, and took her arm in his. "I know," he whispered to her. "Seeing him that way is . . . difficult."

She had put the pain in her knee out of her mind, but when LaCroix drew her attention back to it, she was grateful for the diversion.

"I had a spa installed. I thought Nicholas and my occasional guests might enjoy it. The hot water might be beneficial . . ."

To Natalie, it sounded great, but then she remembered that she was one mortal woman apparently alone in the middle of nowhere with four vampires, and the only one of them she trusted completely was at that moment sound asleep and no match for the other three, anyway.

"Thank you," she said sincerely, "but what I really need is to get back to my car. I have some pills I can take . . ."

"I'm afraid that is out of the question, Doctor."

Was he saying she would not be allowed to leave? "Why?"

"The vehicle was towed away late this afternoon. I'm afraid the local constabulary grew suspicious when no one returned for it."

"Damn it!" Natalie cursed. "My purse was in there . . . Oh, my God, so was Vachon's food . . ." She hoped Vachon had his ID on him. He didn't need to be dead yet again . . .

LaCroix was no help at all. "I fear that foul play will be suspected."

Natalie's heart raced. She really didn't know LaCroix and she had just met the Inca. Nick and Vachon would be no help to her. Just how much trouble was she in?

Nineteen

"But I have to get back to Albuquerque," Natalie protested, and largely that was true. If nothing else, she had to get Vachon's prescription replaced, and she told LaCroix this.

"Vampires do not require medication," he said, more condescendingly that she had patience for.

"I'm a doctor. I'm a better judge of that than you are."

He turned her to face him. "Dr. Lambert, please calm down. Your heartbeat threatens to deafen me. I am not going to hurt you, and neither will anyone else here. I am just trying to tell you that it is out of the question. There is simply no way for you to get there at the moment."

This was true. There was no reason for her to assume the Inca was in the business of transporting mortals, and it was more than a hundred miles, anyway.

Like it or not, she was stuck there for now.

She stepped away from him and her knee almost buckled. LaCroix caught her before she fell.

"I will have arrangements made if you wish to leave."

What she said next surprised her. "No. I don't want to leave."

LaCroix raised an eyebrow. "You are sure?"

"I need more time with Nick. I can't accept that he's insane. It's something else. I just need to find out what it is."

"Of course you are welcome, Dr. Lambert, but . . ."

"Vachon, too. He'll be safe here. I had no idea how susceptible he was to becoming ill. I don't even know what he's picked up, but it took only a brief contact with mortals to do it. He needs to be isolated until he's stronger."

"He may stay—if that is his wish. I will not force him."

"And I really do need to get his medication replaced . . ."

LaCroix put up a hand to silence her. "Write down everything you require to work here. I will ensure the necessary provisions."

"Work? You mean research?"

"If it means helping Nicholas, yes." He could see Natalie didn't understand this turn of events, so he explained. "Dr. Lambert, it is no secret to you that I have wealth. I even enjoy a certain degree of power in select circles. If we were mortal, I would have had Nicholas to a dozen specialists by now, but you and I both know that simply is not possible."

"LaCroix, I'm not sure how much I can do. I haven't been that much help to Vachon."

"You think not? What would he have done had you not been there? All I am asking is that you be here for Nicholas, too."

Natalie looked back at the room they had just left, at Nick, alone someplace that neither of them could reach. She couldn't leave him wherever that was. If there was a way to bring him back, she had to try to find it.

She spent the next few hours making a list of laboratory supplies she might need as well as every drug she could think of that was, or might be, effectively used on a vampire. Better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it. She wished she'd brought copies of her notes along.

She also wrote a personal letter to Grace. No telling what questions were going to be asked in Toronto when the New Mexico police failed to find her, and when they discovered that the neatly packaged blood in the Coleman cooler was human. She didn't want to tell her friend any more lies, so she kept the letter as brief as possible. She did tell her the one thing that she hoped would keep Grace from going to the authorities when she received the letter. She told her she had found Nick Knight.

❑❑❑❑❑

After a restful night's sleep in Janette's bedroom, during which her knee ceased its protests for the time being, Natalie borrowed leggings and a T-shirt from the wardrobe. Not exactly Janette's style, but apparently the elegant vampire did dress casually on occasion, and judging from the labels inside, even those clothes weren't cheap.

The clock on the VCR said 3:17. The vampires were still asleep.

She checked on Vachon, who had been moved to a room with two beds. The Inca was still with him, and Natalie didn't doubt that if it had been anyone but her, he would have been awake in an instant. Vachon had been asleep for almost twenty hours. His breathing was still ragged, but even though he didn't look any better, he didn't seem any worse, either.

She went into the kitchen for a glass of water, and discovered the can opener on the table. LaCroix must have looked for it until he found it. Well, she couldn't fault his hospitality.

She ate another can of spaghetti while sitting in front of the TV. LaCroix had every channel in the known universe, and it took her a couple of hours just to find and surf through them all.

Vachon was the first one to wake up. He drifted into the kitchen in his socks and jeans and leaned against the wall for a moment with his eyes closed. When he opened them again, he seemed bewildered by his surroundings.

Natalie went to him. "Vachon?"

His eyes were still irritated from sun exposure, and he squinted when he looked at her. "Hi. I thought maybe I was dreaming . . . How did you get here?"

"I came looking for you, and your brother found me."

"He's *not* my brother."

Okay, touchy subject . . .

"The Inca, then. He brought me here. We're stuck here for now. The police towed the car when I didn't get back to it."

"Is Nick here? I remember feeling him, I think . . ."

Vachon seemed more disoriented that the situation warranted.

"He's here. You were right . . . Are you okay?"

He nodded, but started coughing, a deep, wracking cough. The steel arrow hadn't punctured his lung, but whatever bug he had picked up had invaded his respiratory system.

"Come and sit down," Natalie told him.

"I'm all right."

"You're sick."

"That's not news, Natalie." He eased himself carefully into one of the kitchen chairs, guarding the wound on his side.

Natalie tried to move his hand to examine it, but he pulled away. "Leave me alone."

"Well, we're in a crabby mood this evening." She tried to make light of it, but it did surprise her. She had seen him depressed, but usually he wasn't hostile.

The bottles in the refrigerator all looked alike to her, so she grabbed the nearest one and hoped she wasn't pouring Vachon something that LaCroix didn't want to share. She handed a mugful of it to him after warming it.

He drank it slowly, but finished it and pushed the empty mug towards her for a refill.

When she put it back down in front of him, he remained perfectly still, his eyes half-closed, completely unaware of her presence.

"Vachon?" She nudged him gently and got no response. "Vachon!"

Her shouting startled him, but it took him a few moments to come back to full consciousness.

He knew what had happened. "I guess now we know the

drug was working." He reached for his mug and drank. "Did you bring it?"

She told him what had happened to the Dilantin.

As he always did, he calmly accepted this piece of unwanted news, but when LaCroix emerged from behind the locked steel door and fixed a disapproving stare on the younger vampire, Vachon stared straight back at him defiantly.

"What?" he said finally.

LaCroix's eyebrows lifted as he eyed Vachon's bare chest and dirty jeans. "I see I must arrange for a more . . . extensive . . . wardrobe for you."

"That's not a bad idea, LaCroix. Especially since my shirt has a big, bloody hole in it thanks to you." He pushed himself away from the table and got up to leave, but had to steady himself against the back of the chair.

Natalie saw the blank expression return to his face. Alarmed, she realized that this was the second, possibly third seizure she'd witnessed in less than fifteen minutes.

She supported him so he wouldn't fall until he came out of it. When he did, he pushed away from her and staggered into the living room as if he was drunk. There were two steps leading down into the sunken living room, and nothing for him to hold on to. She held her breath as he barely managed to negotiate them without falling. Nevertheless, he sat down in front of the TV as if absolutely nothing were wrong.

Natalie turned to the other vampire. "LaCroix, he's in trouble. I told you that prescription had to be replaced."

"It's being taken care of," he assured her, and did not seem overly concerned. He was heating more blood in two mugs when Nick appeared.

For the briefest moment, she made eye contact with him before his attention was diverted to Vachon. He did not react to Vachon's presence in any particular way, but clearly, he noticed that he was there.

LaCroix seemed to find this unusual. He sounded almost excited when he approached Nick, but his voice remained calm, soothing. "It's Vachon, Nicholas. He's alive."

There was no surprise, no joy, no indication that Nick even cared Vachon wasn't dead, but he did keep staring at him, and Natalie noted that for an brief time, there was something behind those dead eyes.

What did he remember?

Vachon turned around and their eyes met. Neither vampire said a word to the other, but Natalie had the strangest sensation that *something* passed between them. Finally, Vachon said, "Hello, Nick."

Nick said nothing, but a slight nod of his head acknowledged Vachon's greeting.

LaCroix noted the exchange with more than mild interest, but didn't comment on it. He guided Nick to the table and handed him his mug.

Natalie looked at it suspiciously. "Human?" she asked LaCroix.

"Yes, Dr. Lambert." LaCroix's voice offered no apologies. "It is his natural food."

Natural food or no, Nick seemed to want no part of it. He only drank a few sips because LaCroix intimidated him into it by raising his voice and telling him he'd force it into him if he didn't drink it.

He was the old LaCroix at that point—domineering and insistent. Nick was defenseless against the verbal assault and probably would be against a physical one as well.

Natalie didn't like the way LaCroix handled the situation and told him so. "Is this what you do? Bully him? Or is this show for my benefit?"

LaCroix's eyes were still hard when he looked at her. "I assure you, Dr. Lambert, it is not a . . . show, as you put it. I have had to force feed him at times. It's a most trying experience, and a rather messy one. It is not something you want to witness, I assure you." He punctuated his comments by shoving Nick's mug at him again. "Finish it!" he commanded.

Vachon didn't turn around, but said, "It gets worse if he feeds."

"What?" Natalie turned to him.

"The blood . . . makes it worse . . ."

"Vachon, what are you talking about?"

The younger vampire buried his face in his hands. "I don't know . . . I . . ."

His body shook suddenly as if he was shivering, but if anything, the room was too warm. He leaned over until he was lying down on the couch.

He whispered Natalie's name.

Before she reached him, Amaru appeared from out of nowhere and was also at Vachon's side when Natalie knelt beside him. He looked questioningly at Natalie as Vachon's eyes glazed over and his body trembled.

The convulsions rapidly increased in intensity and it was soon apparent to Natalie that these were not the mild tonic spasms and lapses of consciousness he'd had in the past. He was having a full-blown grand mal seizure.

Amaru crouched beside Natalie. "What can I do?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. It just has to run its course."

LaCroix's attention was diverted away from Nick. She could read nothing in the expression on his face as they waited for the seizure to stop.

When it did, Vachon had no pulse, which was not surprising, but he wasn't breathing, either. Vampires didn't need a steady supply of oxygen to stay alive, but they did need it to remain conscious. Natalie checked Vachon's eyes. The pupils were dilated. He looked dead.

"LaCroix . . ." she said, alarmed. ". . . is he alive? Can you tell?"

"He is alive," the Inca answered for him, but he, too, was uneasy.

It caught them all off-guard when Nick joined them.

He said nothing, his face betrayed no emotion, but from that buried place in his mind, somehow a tiny spark of Nick Knight the cop managed to emerge. Astonished (and a bit embarrassed that she hadn't thought of it herself) Natalie watched as he bent over Vachon and without missing a beat began to perform textbook perfect CPR on the unconscious vampire . . .

Of course, with a heart that beat only six or seven times a minute, there was no way to tell if the "C" part was even necessary, but Vachon did start to breathe again, and became particularly animated when he woke up with Nick's mouth covering his.

"Hey, I'm okay!" He pushed Nick away, with a horrified look on his face that would have made Natalie laugh under other circumstances.

Nick backed off, his face still devoid of expression, but for a brief moment, Natalie thought, *her* Nick had been there. Somehow, somewhere, he still *was*, and damn it, she was going to find him and bring him back.

Twenty

Natalie estimated that LaCroix got Nick to drink about twenty-four ounces before he let him go, about the same amount that Vachon had consumed. By comparison, LaCroix and the Inca each consumed eight or nine times that much. Vachon would probably come back for more later. He usually did, and often consumed a normal quantity of blood over the course of the night. But if this small amount was all Nick was eating, it wasn't any wonder he looked like he was starving.

Amaru powered up LaCroix's computer and found the game pack. Vachon's curiosity quickly drew him to the machine as well.

Natalie watched them together for awhile. They were exactly the same size, same build, same dark hair and eyes. She wondered if their master's choice had been a deliberate one. She noticed that although they didn't look alike, they shared many of the same mannerisms and facial expressions. How much of that came from the bloodlink they shared? Had some of this been passed down from their master along with the genetic aberration which had made them what they were? Or had it come from the fact that each was brought across with the blood of the other?

She made a mental note to jot down her observations and then left to look in on Nick. She found him exactly as she had left him the night before, sitting on the floor bent over his red-painted canvas, meticulously applying more red paint in tiny strokes.

She approached him slowly. She didn't want to spook him.

"Can I see what you're painting, Nick?"

There was no reaction one way or the other when she sat down beside him and studied his work. His face was so close to it that she had difficulty making out what he was painting at first, but slowly the image became apparent; A battlefield littered with dismembered corpses. It was repulsive and horrifying, but she kept her comment calm and non-judgmental.

"That's very interesting. It must be very difficult to get the right shadings and textures with just one color."

He stopped for a moment as if considering this, and then went back to work, dabbing paint in tiny circular strokes, each one studied at close range.

A sudden thought struck Natalie like a lightning bolt. Nick was physically much too close to what he was doing.

His vampire vision should have allowed him to see and accurately place those brush strokes an arm's length away.

She remembered when Vachon couldn't see well enough to read. His vision still hadn't come back a hundred percent.

"It's worse when he feeds," Vachon had said when Nick was refusing the blood. Why had he said that? How did he know?

And, of course, the answer was obvious. The one thing Vachon and Nick had in common was that they had both survived being attacked by Divia.

Nick thought he had escaped unscathed. But what if he hadn't? What if the incident in the loft just days later—either the emotional impact of thinking he'd killed her, or the actual physical impact of the blow struck by LaCroix—had weakened him just enough that Divia's poison had finally been able to overwhelm him?

There could have been any number of reasons why the effect was not as dramatic in Nick as it had been in Vachon. Nick was a bit older and stronger for one thing, and he was physically larger than Vachon, or at least, he had been at the time they were attacked.. For another, Vachon's blood had not been subjected to the experimentation and tampering that might have ironically made Nick less susceptible. Also, Nick was related to Divia--her vampire "grandson." Maybe her poison could not work its full evil on him because he had somehow inherited from her a resistance to it. Or, perhaps she had simply chosen not to completely destroy a consanguineous vampire.

Another thought occurred to her. Vachon's vampire abilities had been severely impaired by what Divia had done to him. LaCroix had said it himself, "I can barely feel him." And what had the Enforcer said? ". . . practically mortal."

Vachon hadn't tried to make a vampire in that condition, but what if he had? What kind of fledgling would the act have begotten? What if the vampire element in his blood had become so diluted, *it wouldn't work*?

Could that be the reason why she hadn't come across when LaCroix had given her Nick's blood?! Had Nick's blood been just powerful enough to heal her over a period of days, yet not potent enough to effect the transformation of her cells into those of a vampire?!

And why wasn't she poisoned as well?

Her mind was racing again. There were a million things that had to be done. Samples to be taken, tests to run . . . And, first, she'd have to run the idea by LaCroix. The old vampire would be able to tell her if what she was thinking wasn't possible. She didn't think he'd tell her it wasn't if that was not the truth. She'd seen the way he looked at Nick. In his own way, he wanted him back every bit as much as she did.

She returned to the living room where LaCroix was calmly reading, and Vachon and Amaru were arguing in over something that had to do with the game on the screen. Whatever language they were using, it wasn't one Natalie had ever heard.

Vachon was clearly the more excitable of the two, but the Inca wasn't backing down. The funny thing about Amaru was that while he was apparently willing to do what was necessary to ensure Vachon's safety, he didn't seem to particularly *like*

him at all.

LaCroix put his book down when she sat beside him. He nodded in Vachon's direction.

"He has difficulty staying with the game."

"It's because of the seizures. He's probably losing consciousness even when he doesn't look like it." Abruptly discontinuing the Dilantin had caused the attacks to return more severely than before, just as she had feared. "Is that what they're fighting about?"

"No." LaCroix smiled indulgently. "I believe it is a disagreement concerning tactics . . ."

"What language is that?"

A raised eyebrow. "Well, it appears to be roughly seven or eight dialects of Spanish with some French and a couple of very dead languages thrown in. I do not doubt that they are the only ones who understand it."

Natalie would have loved to have known how that particular oddity evolved, but there were more pressing matters at hand.

"You have something you wish to tell me, Dr. Lambert?"

Now, how did the old devil know that?

"Yes. I've noticed certain similarities between Nick and Vachon. I think they may have to do with the fact that they were both attacked by Divia."

She saw that he was interested, and he calmly bade her continue. She outlined her theory for him.

"Is it possible?"

He appeared to mull it over and finally said, "Such conjecture is not without its merits."

"The problem is, I'm going to have to run preliminary laboratory analyses, so I'll need equipment . . ."

"Everything you've asked for will be procured, I assure you."

"And I'll need to run tests and take samples. Some of it won't be too pleasant for Nick. I don't know how he'll react."

"Nor do I," LaCroix said honestly.

"Also . . . I will need a healthy vampire for my control."

"That will not be a problem." LaCroix didn't bat an eye. "I'm sure that Amaru will . . . volunteer."

Natalie got the idea that the young vampire wouldn't be given a choice. The look on her face must have conveyed her disapproval to LaCroix.

He explained, "I would gladly offer myself for that purpose, but I, too, was attacked by Divia. If I am correct, that would make me unsuitable as a control."

Natalie's shoulders slumped. "It would also shoot a hole in my theory."

"Not necessarily."

"But you aren't sick."

He gave her a wry smile. "I am also almost two thousand years old, Dr. Lambert. And, Divia *was* my master. It is possible these things afforded me a certain degree of immunity that Nick and Vachon did not enjoy. Also, Nicholas killed her before she finished the job."

"You're right, though. Even if you weren't affected, the exposure renders you inappropriate as a control subject."

Vachon and Amaru had stopped arguing. They were playing Tetris from a keypad, a feat which Natalie had found to be only one step above impossible, since she didn't possess the Inca's lightning reflexes. Vachon didn't have the manual dexterity to work the keys, but he seemed to be deciding the placement of the pieces.

When she looked over their shoulder, she saw they'd already attained a phenomenally high score with Vachon issuing one word commands that made no sense to her but which Amaru seemed to understand perfectly.

She expected them to beat the game, but they didn't, and that made Vachon angry.

Natalie put her hands on his shoulders to calm him down. "It's just a game, Vachon."

"I know," he sighed. "But it was easy . . . before."

She gently pulled his hair back out of his face. "Yeah. I know."

"Enough of this," Amaru decided for them both. He turned the computer off. "You should feed," he told Vachon.

Natalie agreed. When she had Vachon alone in the kitchen, she asked him about what had happened earlier.

"You said Nick was worse when he feeds. Explain that to me."

"I was just babbling."

"No, you weren't. Now tell me."

He stared at his mug, searching for words. "I'm not sure I can explain it . . . Can you tell me something, Natalie? Nick was attacked by Divia, too, wasn't he?"

Natalie's mind backtracked and she realized that there was no way Vachon could have known that. He had already "died" when Divia had sought Nick out.

"Yes! Yes, he was . . ." Natalie said excitedly. "What made you think that, Vachon?"

"Nick and I are linked somehow. I felt it when he walked in the room. It was more than just the sense of another vampire. I think I could have known his thoughts if I'd tried . . . I did know what he was feeling when LaCroix tried to make him eat. Remember the first few days, after I . . . woke up?"

"Yes."

"I was hungry, but the blood made me hurt inside. Not just physical pain, but the hallucinations, too."

"Yes, of course I remember . . ." Natalie was beginning to see a picture emerge

"Nick's the same way, only instead of visions he . . ." Vachon leaned his head on his hands. "I'm not sure I'm explaining this right, but he's disconnected somehow. It's like he's dreaming, but he's awake. That's what I felt from him. The blood causes the physical pain, too, but worse than that it makes him feel like he's . . . nowhere." He shook his head. "I'm not making sense."

"Yes, you are, Vachon. More than you know. But this 'link' between you, what do you think it is?"

"Do you really want to know what I think?"

"Yes, and it's important."

"I think Divia somehow left a part of herself in both of us. I think that in some way, we're linked through her."

Twenty-One

Vachon would be of no further help to her. Two hours before dawn, he lapsed into a coma after a particularly brutal seizure that had lasted several minutes. Natalie had known the potential for something like that existed once the Dilantin had been withdrawn so abruptly, but she had hoped it wouldn't happen. Whether it was a lack of oxygen, a hemorrhage, or his vampire physiology reacting to the rampant electrical discharge, without sophisticated diagnostic equipment, there was no way for her to determine exactly what had caused his brain to shut down. Maybe his body had simply just given up. She could do nothing to help him.

Nick had somehow known when it happened. He had left his work and stood by with a puzzled look on his face as Natalie tried in vain to elicit some sort of response out of Vachon. The only thing that seemed to get any reaction at all was intentionally inflicting pain, so after a few attempts, she quite trying.

Nick seemed confused and frightened by this unexpected turn of events, but so did Amaru, and even LaCroix, in his own indirect way.

Natalie wished she could have been of some comfort, but that wasn't possible. This was a dangerous complication, and she couldn't pretend that it wasn't serious.

LaCroix assured her that the medication she had requested was on its way, but she had to tell him that the only effect it would have at that point would be to protect him from further injury, not to reverse whatever damage had already occurred.

Despite her certainty that even LaCroix could not get things done so quickly, Natalie was amazed when a laboratory full of equipment arrived just before dawn. How had he managed to gather that much together in just twenty-four hours? It wasn't everything she'd need, but it was enough to start.

Natalie was with Vachon when it arrived, so she didn't see how it got there. She heard no plane or helicopter, but she had no idea how far beneath the surface Vachon's room was, either. She doubted any kind of vehicle could have made it over the hellish terrain, and there was too much for even several vampires to have carried it.

Along with the equipment were clothing, groceries for her, and some of the drugs she'd requested, including the Dilantin.

She immediately unpacked a syringe and prepared it with a carefully measured dose of the drug.

Amaru watched her inject it directly into Vachon's stomach along with a full unit of blood.

"He wants to wake up," he told her. "He is trying to, but he cannot."

"I know," Natalie said. "All we can do right now is try to make him comfortable."

"LaCroix said there would be things you would need to do to me."

"Some medical tests, yes. Some of them might be painful."

"And this will help you cure Vachon, and Nicholas?"

Natalie was honest with him. "I hope it will, but I don't know that for sure."

She realized this was a touchy situation. If the Inca didn't want to cooperate, there was no way for her to force him, but she also had no doubt that LaCroix would, and she'd have no choice but to be a party to it.

Luckily, he made it easy for her.

He smiled. "Again, we will do what is necessary."

Over the next two days, she gathered skin, hair, blood and tissue samples from her three subjects. Oddly, she found she didn't have to sedate Nick for most of the procedures as she had thought she would. He did not find them pleasant and more than once bared his fangs at her, but he still submitted to them willingly.

Did he remember her poking and prodding him from before, and know instinctively that even if she hurt him, she was not trying to harm him? It almost seemed that way.

Nonetheless, LaCroix insisted on being present, and she wasn't altogether in disagreement with that. Even comatose, Vachon had reacted to pain by trying to bite her a couple of times, so she couldn't trust Nick completely.

She ran what tests she could on the samples and then had LaCroix arrange for the others to be performed by Grace. Natalie trusted her friend to conduct only those analyses she specifically asked for, and to keep her confidence about any untoward results she obtained. Natalie knew that if Grace looked at the samples under a microscope, they would look odd and unfamiliar, so she told her to expect that. Grace was a practical woman, and the idea that the blood came from vampires would never enter her mind. However, just to be on the safe side, Natalie had her conduct specific tests on the samples that would not involve her having to actually determine what species they came from. She wanted a DNA analysis, toxicological screenings and an immunological report. If Grace found something weird and questioned it, Natalie could chalk it up to "the condition" Nick suffered from, which was not a lie. *For once*.

Nick had once explained to her that vampires had only one body fluid: blood. But she had found that was not entirely the truth. Their saliva was completely unique in chemical structure, and while one of its components was blood plasma, that was not all that it was. And though she had never mentioned it to Vachon, the scientist in her simply had not been able to pass up the opportunity to analyze a semen sample after she had had intercourse with him. She had discovered that while it consisted primarily of blood and looked like it, it, too, contained other unique components.

Knowing these things, she concluded that she would also need to draw samples of bone marrow and spinal fluid, or whatever their vampire equivalent was. The marrow might tell her what was happening to Vachon's immune system. Despite the coma, his body seemed to be putting up a fight against the infection he'd contracted. He was sick, but it wasn't

overpowering him.

Perhaps analyzing the spinal fluid from Nick and Vachon would reveal what it was that had wreaked such havoc with their nervous systems.

She was also looking for anything that might provide some insight into why she did not come across when LaCroix had given her Nick's blood.

Amaru refused sedation for the procedures, even though Natalie warned him that there could be considerable discomfort involved. He stoically endured the withdrawal of the bone marrow, but she had not done a lumbar puncture on a live patient since her internship, and the dura mater covering his spinal cord was as tough as shoe leather. She had to do a lot of twisting, pushing and rotating to penetrate it. It had to have been extremely painful, and sensing that, LaCroix had stood by ready to restrain him if it became necessary. Luckily, it didn't, but both vampires were clearly relieved when it was over.

She sedated Nick and Vachon when she took fluid samples from them, but was surprised when her needle met with only slightly above normal resistance when she performed the procedure on Nick, and none at all when she did it to Vachon. The Enforcer's words came back to her again, ". . . practically mortal."

The spinal fluid, like their saliva, did not look like blood at all, although it was an abnormal pink color. She was excited to discover that the samples from Nick and Vachon contained numerous white blood cells, but Amaru's contained none. She wondered what Grace would conclude from studying it.

LaCroix arranged for the samples to be delivered into Grace's hands along with Natalie' specific directions for their analysis.

There was nothing to do then but wait.

Nick finished the red painting and started on a white one, a barren arctic landscape, cold and forbidding. He permitted her to sit beside him while he worked, even though he did not speak to her or otherwise acknowledge her presence.

"You're really big on the gloom and doom these days, aren't you, Nick?" she said as he put the finishing touches on the frozen skeleton of some sea mammal.

He stopped painting and held perfectly still, staring at the painting as if seeing something in it for the first time.

Natalie's first instinct was to retract the statement, but then she saw that he actually appeared to be considering her criticism for a brief instant.

Still, she thought some damage control was in order. "You do have a very graphic imagination. And, I can't say your work isn't totally original, because I've never seen anything like it."

That seemed to please him. He dipped his brush and went back to painting the bare bones.

She only stayed with him awhile. She had been working twenty hours a day for the past few days, so she was exhausted, and Nick's condition was an emotional drain on her.

She was thinking of turning in as she neared Vachon's room and heard LaCroix speaking in his resonant Nightcrawler voice. She didn't think it was a conversation, not only because Vachon was quite unable to speak, but because the tone was too formal. Was he playing old Nightcrawler tapes? Trying to recapture the Glory Days, as it were?

But to her surprise, when she reached Vachon's room, she found him sitting in a chair, reading. Vachon's eyes were open, looking at the old vampire. Natalie had no idea if he could actually see or not, or if he understood any of it. Perhaps he only found the sound of LaCroix's soft, melodic voice soothing, but some part of him was listening.

She sat down on Vachon's bed and listened, too. LaCroix was reading Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land.* His dry wit caused her to chuckle a couple of times as he recited the Martian-born character's impressions of Earth.

Eventually, he reached the end of a chapter and closed the book.

"I have heard that sometimes this type of stimulation is helpful in . . . a case like Vachon's," he explained, holding up the book. "Amaru told me he liked this story, and I happened to have a copy . . ." He seemed to want to excuse his behavior. *Doesn't want anyone to know he cares.*

"I think he was listening," Natalie said, fingering Vachon's hair.

Both of them were silent. Natalie knew it was because they were thinking the same thing.

A human in Vachon's condition would quite possibly develop complications that would quickly prove fatal. Natalie doubted that would happen to Vachon, and even if it did, it would likely not kill him. If they didn't feed him, he would starve, but he wouldn't die. Unless he was staked, or left in the sun, he could remain in that state literally forever.

LaCroix got up to leave and as he did, he put a hand on her shoulder. "I think it is a bit premature to abandon all hope," he said. "He has endured more than any vampire I know of, and still, he wants to live. I can feel that. His will is strong. I just wish Nicholas . . ." His voice trailed off. "Get some rest, Doctor. You are fatigued."

When he was gone, she allowed that he was right about giving up hope. They still had not heard from Grace, and it was possible she had found something—anything—in the samples that would allow her to perform a miracle and make Nick and Vachon whole again.

But the question of what she would do if the day came when there was no more hope still nagged at her. LaCroix would not allow Vachon to go on like this, not because he was cruel, but because he wasn't. And what alternatives could she offer, anyway?

She picked up Vachon's pale, cold hand and held it to her cheek. "I'm not going to let you go without a fight," she promised him, and she would keep that promise until it was a certainty that keeping him alive would be less merciful than ending his suffering permanently. They weren't at that point yet.

She squeezed her eyes shut to keep the tears from falling, but one escaped anyway, and it was as if a dam had burst. Her weariness, her uncertainty about Nick, her fears for Vachon, all came pouring out, and in that moment, she knew that nothing in her life mattered without Them, without these vampires.

What that made her, she didn't know, nor did she care. She remembered what the Enforcer had told her, "You are capable of loving us."

And she did love them. Ruthless, murdering, perfect predators that they were, she still loved them.

Please don't leave me, Vachon. Please, oh please, come back to me, Nick!

Her misery was interrupted by a cool hand on her shoulder.

Damn, she didn't want LaCroix to see her crying.

But when she turned around, it wasn't LaCroix.

It was Nick.

He sat beside her on the bed, and awkwardly, wordlessly, took her in his arms. His intentions were unreadable. It was as if he knew this was something he was supposed to do, even though he didn't remember why and seemed not to completely remember how.

He touched her hair and then wiped a tear from her cheek. For a fleeting instant, there was some emotion in his eyes. It vanished too quickly for her to be certain what it was—concern? confusion? love?

But he was holding her, and it felt so good to be in his arms again. It made no difference to her at all what he was, and she wondered how she could have ever been so foolish as to have let it matter.

This was a vampire. *Her* vampire. She loved him, no matter what, and she always would.

Twenty-Two

Natalie was asleep when Grace called, and was completely disoriented when LaCroix woke her up, handed her the cordless phone, and abruptly left. She hadn't heard it ring and didn't even know where he kept it. Add that to the surprise of waking up with LaCroix standing over her—she had locked the door— and it took her a few moments to connect with what Grace was telling her. The woman was apologizing profusely for something.

"Grace, Grace . . . slow down. I'm half asleep. What are you talking about?"

Grace told her. The New Mexico State Police had run a check on her with the Toronto P.D. after they had picked up her abandoned car and failed to find a trace of her in the surrounding area. She was surprised to learn they had searched the Malpais from the air for two days in an attempt to find her.

The Toronto Police had asked her coworkers where she had planned to go, or who she might have visited. The investigating officers knew full well who she was, and treated the case as if it involved one of their own. They had been thorough. A check of the airline's records had revealed she had been assigned a seat on two different flights next to one Javier D. Vachon who, it turned out, had somehow managed to obtain an Ontario driver's license without any documentation.

"What? How did they know to connect me to him?"

Dead silence.

"Grace?"

"Natalie, I was worried, and they asked me and . . ."

"What did you tell them?"

"About that guy you had living with you. I told them what he looked like, and he matched the description of this Vachon guy."

Natalie sighed, but she was sure LaCroix could take care of any complications that might arise from this, so she told Grace, "Don't worry about it. Vachon's not anyone dangerous. What else?"

"What were you doing with a picnic cooler filled with human blood, Natalie? They wanted to know that, too."

"What did you tell them?"

"I didn't tell them anything because by the time they asked about it, I'd already gotten your letter. How did you get that to me so quickly? It got here the same day you dated it. What did you do, send it by supersonic carrier pigeon?" *Close enough.*

"What the hell is going on, Natalie? Why on earth did you leave your car in the middle of nowhere? Who is this Vachon guy? And what were you doing with that blood?"

"It's my research, Grace. You know I use large samples of blood for that." Natalie tried to ignore the other questions.

"Well, who is this guy you're with?"

"He's Nick's cousin. You met him."

"I thought his name was Xavier?"

"Yeah, well, it's uh, the same guy . . . Have you had a chance to analyze those samples?" she changed the subject.

She had labeled the samples only with the vampires' initials, A, V and K, but Grace was smart enough to figure out the V and K, now that she knew Nick's "cousin" was named Vachon.

"Who is sample A from?" she wanted to know.

Again, Natalie did her best to be evasive. "Why? Did you find something unusual?"

"Are you sitting down? This might take awhile."

"I'm still in bed, Grace. Run it past me."

Grace had discovered a number of relatively trivial things which Natalie had expected. The abnormal DNA patterns, certain unique proteins in the blood and tissues, and other anomalies which Natalie casually dismissed as attributable to Nick's genetic disorder.

But Grace had also made an important discovery.

"Understand that you didn't tell me what I was supposed to be looking for," she said accusingly, "so I was pretty much hunting fleas on a black dog . . ."

"Tell me what you found, Grace."

"Well, the toxicology reports indicate that both the V and K samples have traces of the toxin we found in the earlier samples we took from Xavier. Is Nick sick, Natalie?"

No point in lying to her about that. "Yes, Grace, he is."

"I was afraid of that. I'm sorry to hear it. But, as I was saying, I really didn't know what I was supposed to do with that information, so I did a comparison with what we have on file in the computer. It turned out the same toxins were found in a blood sample taken from a Jane Doe, but I guess no one ever asked for the results on her, probably because of the condition her body was in. The report lists the cause of death as due to massive blood and tissue loss, so the presence of this toxin was probably not what killed her . . ."

"Grace, wait a minute. What Jane Doe? Do you have the report there?"

"Yes, it just says Jane Doe, age approximately 20-25, blonde, 5'6" . . . You signed the thing, and Nick was the investigating officer. The case is closed, but no indication how it was resolved . . ."

"What's the date?"

Grace read it to her. It was Urs. It had to be. If her blood was poisoned with the same toxin found in Nick's and Vachon's samples, Divia had to be the source.

But to be sure, she asked, "And there was no trace of the toxin in the A sample?"

"No. None. Just the same goofy-looking blood cells that were in all three samples, except there were 20-30 times more of them and they appeared more . . . well, they just looked healthier. I can't explain it . . ."

Great. She'd looked under a microscope just like Nat had hoped she wouldn't.

"This thing that Nick has . . . it causes deformities in the blood cells? Like sickle cell disease?" Grace asked.

Well, now, that was a perfectly good lie, and she didn't even have to make it up herself . . . "Yes," she jumped in quickly. "The symptoms are different, but basically, yes, the blood cells are affected."

"Well, you might find this interesting. All three spinal fluid samples contained those aberrant blood cells, but the V and K samples also contained a second type of cell, bigger, with a rougher surface. The cell count was roughly the same in all three samples, so it appears these cells had replaced the normal blood cells . . . or, at least what is normal for this condition."

"Really?"

"Yes, and they had antibodies attached to them, so I thought they might be foreign. If they were, then the source of the original infection might have been Jane Doe. The funny thing is, these cells don't seem to interact with this weird blood of Nick's in the same way it would react with normal blood. In fact, they seem to mostly ignore healthy human blood cells. Something must be different, because Xavier should be dead considering how high his levels were, and if the condition of Nick's blood now is any indication, his levels were once just as high as Xavier's. I analyzed a few of these odd cells separately. I think they are the source of the toxin . . . or were."

"Were?"

"They appear moribund. The cytoplasm itself is saturated with the stuff, but the cells don't seem to be manufacturing or secreting it any longer. Whatever kept these things alive isn't occurring anymore."

Whatever kept these things alive . . .

"They're tough boogers, though. The antibodies seem ineffective. I imagine they will simply die of old age, although there's no telling when that will be."

"Do you know where they might have come from?" Natalie asked.

Grace took a deep breath, like she didn't want to answer.

"Grace?"

"Well, it behaves like a fungus infection, but the cells are definitely not a fungus. They more closely resemble a mutation of the other type of cell. So, I did a PCR on them as well as on the A, V and K specimens, because that would have told me if a mutation had taken place. But, I guess I screwed up and somehow cross-contaminated the samples."

"Why?"

"The sequencing in the strange cells is close enough to Nick's to prove a blood relationship in court, but they are definitely not Nick's cells. No mutation could have made them that genetically different. Besides, the exact same cells were in the V sample, and they don't match the V sequencing at all. What really convinced me that I screwed up was that most of the sequence patterns in the A and V samples are almost identical. I've never seen results like them. The match is much closer than would be expected of siblings, but there are a few minor exceptions that preclude monozygous twins. I had to have messed up."

"Don't worry about it. I'm not sure it's that important that we identify those cells, anyway, if they are inactive." *Especially since I know all I need to know.*

Grace let her breath out. "I'm glad you said that."

Something had happened. "Why?"

"I don't have the A sample anymore. I didn't safeguard it as a biohazard like I did the others. I didn't see any reason to, since you indicated it was a healthy specimen. I took it home to study it under my own microscope, just out of curiosity . . ."

"What happened to it?" Natalie's first concern was that it had fallen into the wrong hands. Her second was that Grace had figured out it wasn't human and had tried to identify it.

Her fears were laid to rest by Grace's next remark.

"Natalie, did you know your cat drinks blood?"

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Natalie mentally sorted out what Grace had told her. Divia had somehow introduced her poisonous cells into Nick and Vachon's bodies, probably via a bite or scratch, where they had rapidly multiplied until she was killed, and their link to her life force was disrupted. She realized there was no scientific explanation for the latter, but there were a lot of things about Them that defied explanation, weren't there?

Divia's mortal body was lethal to mortals, and when she was brought across, her venomous blood changed accordingly. Her cells had secreted the toxins that had savaged healthy cells in the vampires' bodies until so few were left intact that they were no longer effectively vampires. Urs could not cope with both the toxic changes in her blood and her ghastly injuries. Her system had been overwhelmed. Still, Natalie had to wonder, if she had treated her as if she had had a chance of recovering, would she have done so?

Vachon and Nick hadn't been ripped apart, and that was why their systems were able to neutralize the toxin enough to enable them to survive. Nick's body had not recognized Divia's cells as completely foreign because he was descended from her, and he had not been attacked as savagely as Vachon had been. That would explain why he had not reacted as violently to the infection as Vachon had. Maybe it was because Nick's body had had time to partially neutralize the toxins, or the fact that Divia was already dead by the time Natalie drank Nick's blood that explained why the poison had not affected her. Another possibility was suggested by Grace's observation that Divia's poison did not appear to actively seek out healthy

human tissue - maybe her poison simply was not lethal to humans.

Divia's invasive cells were dying in both vampires. That meant what she was dealing with were residual effects—neurological damage from the poison itself, and immune systems devastated by the battle against Divia's rampaging assault. Natalie suspected that the tissues that produced those aggressive, near-omnipotent vampire antibodies had themselves been damaged, and as long as they did not function properly, the damage would go unrepaired.

The one positive sign was that Vachon's immune system had recovered to some extent. It was strong enough to put up a fight against the mortal infections he had contracted. Once Divia's cells were all dead, he might recover on his own. But how long could that take? What if she were to artificially boost his immune system? What if she removed as many of Divia's useless cells as possible and replaced them with healthy vampire cells?

Lyllia's blood had resulted in an improvement, so obviously any vampire's blood would help. But what had Vachon told her about the Inca? "The vampires in us are identical . . ."

Grace had confirmed that Vachon's vampire DNA was almost identical to that of Amaru's. What effect would it have if the vampire blood Vachon was given was virtually his own? Would the regenerative elements be better adapted to rebuilding cells whose genetic make-up they recognized? Any vampire's blood enabled Them to heal quickly, but what if that was only true if what remained of their own cells were still intact?

That had to be true—otherwise, Lyllia's blood would have cured Vachon.

What if, in this case, the blood had to be as near to a perfect match as possible?

There was only one way to find that out, and what Grace had thought were erroneous PCR results had given Natalie not only the question, but the perfect answer to it.

Twenty-Three

Natalie showered and dressed and then discovered that, for the first time, she had awakened after the rest of the household.

Someone had already made coffee for her.

She poured a cup and went to check on Vachon. Amaru was with him, the look on his face not exactly one of brotherly concern, but something was bothering him. She had put Vachon on oxygen the night before. The congestion in his lungs had progressed to pneumonia. She had stepped up the antibiotics, even though she still had no idea if they were even working.

She listened to his chest and discovered there was very little air exchange. His heart rate had risen to an alarming twenty beats per minute in a useless effort to supply his comatose brain with oxygen.

He wasn't going to die. They couldn't suffocate. But in a very short time, he was going to stop breathing, and then his heart would stop. He would not be dead, and yet, he would not be alive, either. The situation brought home the meaning of the term "undead."

"He can't clear his lungs because he can't cough," Natalie explained. "If he were in a hospital, there would be more I could do for him, but here . . ." She shook her head.

"He feels what is happening," Amaru said. "He is afraid."

Natalie put a hand on his shoulder. "So are you, aren't you?"

"I know what he knows, whether I want to or not."

She wouldn't get a better chance than this one.

"Amaru, if you could help him, would you?"

He looked at her as if he were surprised she even had to ask. He made a motion towards his vampire twin. "I would not want this for myself. How can I want it for him?"

The next question: "How much blood can you safely lose?"

That surprised him, too, and he had to think about it. "I don't know what you mean by 'safely'. I could lose all of my blood and recover, I think, but this has never happened to me."

She explained to him what she wanted to do.

"The tests we did, they proved what Vachon told me, that the vampires in you are identical . . ."

The Inca nodded. "It is more than a bloodlink—we are of exactly the same blood."

She thought about skimming over the technical explanation, but didn't, and found that Amaru understood what she was telling him, as did LaCroix, who entered the room as she was speaking.

"If this works," LaCroix asked cautiously, "would it be of use to Nicholas?"

Natalie hadn't wanted to think about that, but now she had to. "LaCroix, I don't know. Vachon and Amaru are an exact match. This is like a human organ transplant. The closer the donor matches the recipient, the better the chances for success. Vachon's recovery is going to depend on whether my theory is correct, that Amaru's blood will recognize Vachon's body as its own and repair it. Nick hasn't got another vampire as closely related to him as these two are . . . does he?"

LaCroix shook his head. "No . . . but . . ."

He had something he wanted to say. "What is it?" she asked.

"Natalie, did you know he brought Janette back across?"

Natalie's face clouded. "He didn't tell me that, but I suspected."

"Janette was mine as Nicholas is mine. But she now is Nicholas' creation, also . . . I have not encountered such a link before, but I suspect it is stronger than the one Nicholas and I share, and the one he shared with her in the past."

Natalie could have kissed the old vampire. It was, she had to admit, a clever observation. "But can you find her? Will she do it?"

"I already know where she is. She *will* do it." That tone again. The old LaCroix. Janette would be made to do this

whether she wanted to or not. Natalie just had to hope she would want to—after she found out if it would even work.

LaCroix warned her before she began that the Vampire Amaru would not tolerate having his blood drained. No matter how much his mortal self desired to participate in the procedure, the vampire would take over and protect both him and itself.

If she drugged him, the drug would be passed to Vachon. He was already so weak that even a small amount would cause instant respiratory and cardiac arrest, and perhaps deepen his coma. They didn't have a choice, though, not really.

She sat down next to Vachon and ran her fingers through his hair, talking to him softly. She explained what they were going to do. He opened his eyes, but she couldn't tell if he understood any of it.

She gathered the supplies she would need, including the two gallons of blood she would give to the Inca to replace what she removed. Once inside his body, it would be converted and become his own, but just to be on the safe side, she had typed it to make certain it was type O-negative, the universal donor.

She decided to use the brachial arteries in the upper arm. Lowering the limb over the edge of the bed would be easy, and would allow gravity to drain the blood from both vampires. It would be necessary for her to cut down to the blood vessel, and even though she would use a local anesthetic, she didn't know if it would work, and so could not guarantee that the procedure would be painless. She told Amaru this, but he was not intimidated by the idea of a relatively insignificant wound. *Still the Inca warrior.* It wasn't until she prepared an injection of curare that she saw the first signs that he might be having misgivings about this adventure. He told her he had never been drugged before.

"You may not lose consciousness, but it will paralyze you. You may feel it when I cut into your arm and put the tubes in, too, but you won't be able to move, or perhaps even speak."

He looked at Vachon as if reconsidering his options, but then said, "That little *piojo* had better remember this."

Natalie administered the injection and waited for the powerful vampire heart beat that would circulate the drug through his system.

When she was satisfied he was immobilized, she worked as quickly as possible to start the actual collection of his blood. Once the blood was flowing freely into the bag, she repeated the process on Vachon, without the curare. She didn't think it was necessary to drug him twice, but LaCroix remained beside him, just in case.

Natalie was touched by how gentle he was with the younger vampire. Something had changed the old demon. Was it seeing what had happened to Nick? He had to blame himself for that. It was because of him that Divia had become the foul creature she had been, a vampire capable of killing with her touch alone. Ironic that she should ultimately turn that power against the one LaCroix cherished above all others.

She wondered how much of what Nick had said about him was the entire truth. She didn't think Nick had lied, but she wondered if he really understood that LaCroix cared for him. True, it was a vampire sort of caring that Natalie did not fully understand, and maybe because Nick did not want to be a vampire, he did not want to understand it, either.

On the other hand, maybe LaCroix had simply learned a lesson from this and was not as mean as he used to be . . .

Natalie carefully monitored both patients. Amaru's heart was stronger, and that caused him to lose blood more quickly, but his body also kept attempting to reject the tubing, trying to close the wound in his arm. She had to keep the vein open by force. That couldn't have been pleasant.

"You're doing fine," she told him, only because that was a thing that doctors said. He really didn't have the option of doing other than "fine" right then.

Eventually, his heart rate began to pick up and his breathing became rapid and shallow. She explained to him what was happening. "You're going to feel dizzy," she told him. "In a few minutes, you're going to pass out." She smoothed his hair the way she liked to do with Vachon's. "When you wake up, this will be over."

After a few minutes, his eyes closed. She put the stethoscope to his chest and actually heard his heart slow and then completely stop. It was an eerie feeling. She had to fight the urge to panic and start resuscitating him.

It was still several minutes before the blood stopped flowing from both vampires.

Natalie's heart jumped when she looked at the two of them, side by side. By all mortal standards, they were both clinically dead.

She immediately began to transfuse the bottled blood into the Inca, but took the opportunity to try to force some of the fluid out of Vachon's lungs before she gave him his twin's blood. LaCroix had to do most of the work, but he followed her instructions diligently, holding him effortlessly so that his head was lower than his chest while she pounded his back and the sides of his ribcage. They were only moderately successful, but the small improvement was better than none at all. It would give him some breathing space to oxygenate his new blood supply.

Unlike her other experiences transfusing vampires, Vachon's impaired system did not instantly began assimilating the Inca's blood by sucking it in, so she started four lines to get it into him as quickly as possible.

An hour after it began, the transfer was complete. Natalie expected Amaru to wake up immediately, and became concerned when he didn't.

LaCroix reassured her, "He will sleep, but he is fine."

"What about him?" she nodded towards Vachon.

LaCroix shook his head. "I don't know. This is new to me, also."

The older vampire suddenly lifted his head as if he'd been startled.

"What is it?" Natalie asked.

He muttered, "Nicholas," and darted from the room.

Natalie looked at the two unconscious vampires. There was nothing either of them needed at the moment except rest.

She ran after LaCroix.

The scene that greeted her was a nightmare. Nick's studio looked as if he had splattered red paint from one end to another, but it wasn't paint, it was blood, and it was his.

LaCroix was forcibly holding Nick in a headlock, and Nick was screaming—pure rage, utter terror and indescribable pain. It was the most horrifying sound Natalie had ever heard.

His fangs were fully extended, and it was only LaCroix's superior strength that was preventing him from ripping either her or LaCroix to shreds, of that she was certain.

She could hear tendons and bones snap as Nick struggled to free himself.

"Vachon's blood . . ." LaCroix gasped. "Go get it! BURN IT!"

"What? . . . I . . ."

"DO IT!"

Natalie ran back to retrieve the bags containing the blood she had taken from Vachon. How the hell was she going to burn it? She thought of the fireplace, but throwing the plastic bags into an open flame could be hazardous to her, assuming she could even get a good fire going . . .

The microwave oven . . .

She shoved the bags into it and set the timer for thirty minutes, hoping the glass on the door would hold when the bags exploded.

It didn't take long. After three minutes, the first bag ruptured and the others quickly followed. The inside of the appliance was soon coated with bubbling red liquid and melting plastic.

And Nick was screaming. So loud now that she could hear him as if he were in the same room.

She peered again through the glass oven door and this time was stricken with horror at the sight of the churning mess beyond it.

The part of Divia that had been in Vachon had been forced from its host and now was boiling away, the cells bursting from within as the microwave radiation cooked the life out of them.

And Nick was still linked to it.

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The inside of the microwave was already ruined, so Natalie left it to continue its work of reducing Vachon's blood to a dry powder.

She had to find out what was happening with Nick.

He had stopped screaming by the time she got to him. He was crying, and Natalie wasn't sure which sound was worse. These weren't muffled sobs. He was under Divia's control, still, and in this moment when Divia faced final destruction, she had reverted to what she had once been in life, however briefly—a human child.

Nick was no longer struggling to get away from LaCroix, but the older vampire continued to hold him close, comforting him, reassuring him. Natalie wondered if those last traces of his mortal daughter connected with him somehow. Had he ever loved Divia? She honestly didn't know. But he did love Nick, she could see that, and in that distant place he was in, she thought Nick saw it now, too.

Both vampires were injured. LaCroix had at least two bloody wounds on his neck and back that were already almost healed. Nick was still bleeding from numerous lacerations. One of his paintings had been ripped from its wooden frame, which had been broken into pieces. A sharp, bloody section of it lay on the blood-stained carpet beside a bloody pair of scissors.

"LaCroix, he's hurt. Let me look at him."

LaCroix shook his head. "Not yet. He's not ready."

"What happened?"

LaCroix closed his eyes and rested his chin on Nick's head as he stroked the pale, long hair.

"I should have known . . . I didn't think . . . We killed a part of Divia when we took it from Vachon's body. It was dying, and the part of her in Nick sensed that. He didn't understand, but Divia did. She wanted revenge." He sighed. "She still hates me, even in death. She is still trying to destroy Nicholas, because she knows that *this* is my child." He drew Nick close to him for a moment. "She knows that I think of her as a monster. I wish I did not, but I do. She wants to kill him, and she wants me dead, also, but these things will not happen. She no longer has form or substance, but she knows this, and her hatred is more intense than anything you can imagine."

Nick had begun to tremble in his arms. "LaCroix, he's going into shock. You have to let me help him."

Nick was quiet by then, just on the brink of consciousness. He moaned in pain as LaCroix removed his shirt.

Even before she got a good look at his injuries, Natalie was horrified. He was so pathetically thin that she could clearly see the outline of his ribcage and collar bones beneath the translucent skin. She had no doubt that he had perforated several organs, and that the stab wounds he had inflicted on himself might have been fatal had he been mortal. There was one especially deep wound just below his sternum. Natalie was afraid to ask the question she suspected, but did anyway.

"He tried to stake himself?"

"I removed it," LaCroix whispered. Natalie noticed that the old vampire didn't look so good himself.

Natalie pressed her ear to Nick's chest and waited for a heartbeat. When one finally happened, she was able to tell LaCroix, "I think he missed his heart."

"It is a miracle, then."

He turned Nick over and Natalie saw what he meant. The improvised stake had penetrated so deeply that there was an exit wound on his back.

"He ran at the walls until he drove it all the way through . . ."

Natalie looked at LaCroix carefully. She honestly thought he might faint on her. "Are you okay?"

He took a deep breath. "Yes . . . yes, of course. It is just that this is . . . not a pleasant thing for a vampire to contemplate . . ."

He looked sadly at Nick, who was once again off in that unknown place.

"He wants to die, Natalie. I can feel that, and I don't know what I can do."

Anyone but LaCroix probably would have dissolved into tears at that point. As it was, the ancient vampire was so visibly shaken that Natalie made a move to comfort him. She put her hand on his shoulder and said, "This is not what our Nick wants. We can help him, and we will."

He reached up and put his hand over hers. A simple gesture, but it said more to her than LaCroix was capable of putting into words.

Twenty-Four

Miraculously, Nick did not appear to have done any serious damage with the stake, but his injuries, like Vachon's, would not heal quickly. Aside from the gory stake wound, he had stabbed himself with the scissors. LaCroix had stopped him from cutting his wrists with them, and that was when Nick had stabbed him. LaCroix had broken both of Nick's wrists trying to restrain him.

Natalie sedated him so she could clean and suture the wounds. Without any x-rays to guide her, she had to rely on LaCroix's exquisite sense of touch to tell her when she had properly set the fractures. She did not have what she needed to make casts—broken bones were one possibility she hadn't foreseen—but she was able to devise splints using the unbroken edges of the picture frame and a bed sheet torn into strips.

Nick tried to remove them with his teeth as soon as she was finished. LaCroix cuffed him sharply on the side of the head to make him stop. After the third time, Nick made the connection and left the splints alone.

Natalie bristled at what she saw as LaCroix's mistreatment, but said nothing. Simply telling Nick not to remove the splints didn't work. She had tried it and so had LaCroix, but the request just didn't sink in.

She also examined LaCroix's injuries, but found that all he needed by that time was a clean shirt.

"He should have something to eat," Natalie said as she cleaned the last traces of blood from Nick's too-thin body.

She helped him sit up, and he winced and put an arm protectively over his chest and abdomen.

"I know the stitches hurt," she told him. "There's nothing I can do about that. Just be careful not to move too quickly."

She spoke as if he would understand her.

He looked at her, directly into her eyes, and for the briefest moment, her Nick was there. She almost expected him to utter one of his playfully sarcastic rebukes of her medical skills, but as if a switch had been thrown, the light quickly went out again.

LaCroix supported him as they made their way to the kitchen at a laborious pace.

Amaru was already there. His keen sense of smell had drawn him to the microwave, and he was peering through the glass door at the mess inside.

"What is this?" he asked no one in particular.

If he shared Vachon's curious nature, his next move would probably be to open the oven door and examine the contents.

"Don't touch it!" Natalie and LaCroix said in unison.

He turned away from it and saw Nick.

"What happened to him?"

"It's a long story," Natalie sighed. "How do you feel?"

"Fine . . . But I need to feed . . ."

He stared at her when he said that. He stared *too* long, and it made her uncomfortable, particularly when she became aware that he was looking at her neck.

LaCroix jerked his arm sharply and shoved a bottle into his hands.

The Inca's predatory stare was instantly replaced with a look of embarrassment. "I'm sorry."

Natalie accepted his apology. She had noticed with Nick that physical stress made the hunger more pronounced. While they had replaced Amaru's blood, some survival mechanism in his body was still on the alert because they had taken it in the first place. She should have anticipated it, and made a note not to be alone with Vachon when he regained consciousness, if he did.

Nick's wrists were too sore to lift the bottle LaCroix put in front of him. Natalie remembered what had worked with Vachon, and snipped a length of surgical tubing to use as a straw. As she had with Vachon, she had to demonstrate what he was supposed to do with it. It often amazed her how some of the most simple aspects of mortal life eluded Them.

The Inca watched curiously as Nick sucked the blood through the tube, and then passed his own bottle to Natalie.

"Put one in here," he ordered.

Natalie was amused by the odd request. Amaru *was* much like Vachon. This was something new, so he had to try it.

Nick drank without much coaxing. Apparently, the emotional crisis had passed, and the vampire that remained in him also sensed the need to replenish itself with blood.

Natalie let herself relax when LaCroix set a cup of coffee and a small plate of chocolate chip cookies in front of her.

"I hope these are to your liking," he said of the cookies. "I have never experienced such delicacies myself."

Natalie was moved by the gesture. And the cookies were great.

"What about Janette?" she asked as she ate.

"I have sent word that she is needed here. She will need some time to make arrangements, but she will come."

"Tell her to bring another microwave," Amaru said, making a face at the cold, bottled blood.

Natalie finished her snack and checked on Vachon.

He was still feverish and unconscious, but amazing changes had occurred already. Listening to his chest, she found his breathing and heart rate were completely normal. His joints were no longer stiff and sore, and she was able to flex his limbs without causing him any pain. The lesions on his skin—the sunburn and the insect bite—had disappeared, and the wounds in his side and thigh from the steel arrows were almost closed.

She said his name, and he reacted by turning his head towards the sound of her voice. His eyes opened briefly, but he sighed softly and closed them again. But his level of awareness indicated that he was no longer comatose, he was just asleep.

It was working. Amaru's blood was repairing the damage.

Still, it was too early to hope for too much. Lyllia's blood had had a similar effect, but had not cured him.

She gave him his Dilantin, as it was much too soon to assume he didn't need it. She left him on oxygen. It wouldn't

hurt and perhaps it was even helping.

She didn't hear Amaru enter the room, so his voice surprised her.

"He is a tough bastard," he said of Vachon.

"Yes," Natalie had to agree. "He just doesn't give up."

The Inca stretched out on his own bed. Natalie suspected he was still feeling the effects of having his blood taken.

"You don't like him much, do you?" she said, nodding towards Vachon.

His response was quick and blunt. "No."

"Why not?"

He scoffed as if the answer to that were obvious. "Because he is reckless and silly."

"No, he isn't."

"I have known him longer than you have."

"That's true, but I wonder if you really know him at all. Or if he really knows you, for that matter."

Amaru thought that one over for a moment, but then said, "I don't want to know him. He tried to kill me."

"He must not have tried very hard."

"Only because he was too hungry. And then he found out he could fly, and the whole idea left his mind. It didn't even occur to him to make sure I was dead, or that I might come looking for him if I wasn't. All he wanted to do was float in the air, like an idiot."

"Why didn't you kill him?"

"I could not think of that then. I needed time to understand what had happened to me, to accept it. He did not. Even now, when we hunt . . ." He looked at her as if making sure this was something she wanted to hear. "He takes those who will not be missed. I take those who deserve to die."

She thought it best not to comment on why he considered himself competent to make such decisions.

"Don't some vampires just . . . kill anybody?" she asked instead.

"Yes. Some cannot control the Hunger. He and I . . . our master gave us that gift, so that we might use it wisely. But, that didn't matter to him. He is selfish and ungrateful, too."

Reckless, silly, an idiot, selfish, and ungrateful . . . because you can't make him do what <u>you</u> want?

"But what you did for him tonight . . . He would have done the same for you."

Amaru looked at her as if this was indisputable. "Of course he would have."

Natalie gave it up. She thought she and Nick had a complicated relationship . . .

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Nick and LaCroix had returned to Nick's studio. LaCroix was picking up the mess and Nick, amazingly, had resumed his painting as if nothing had happened, although he did appear frustrated that his wrists were immobilized by the cumbersome splints, and probably a fair amount of pain, too. This no doubt hampered his ability to apply the tiny brush strokes needed to define his work.

LaCroix handed her two pieces of wood from a broken picture frame.

"Make a cross," he told her. "Put it on your door before you sleep."

"Why?"

"The Inca almost lost control of himself tonight . . . If Vachon should wake up, he might be even more dangerous."

There was more, she knew. "What else?"

"I will keep Nicholas with me as he sleeps. I can no doubt overpower him should it be necessary, but I would still feel better knowing that he will not go near you."

"Why?"

"Because of Divia. Do not doubt that the part of her that still lives in Nicholas wants you dead, too."

Twenty-Five

Natalie had tied together the two pieces of wood LaCroix had given her with a length of gauze bandage, and had used the gauze to rig a hanger for the makeshift cross, which she then hung over the doorknob outside her room.

Despite this vampire equivalent of a "Do Not Disturb" sign, she couldn't sleep, knowing that right then, the only vampire she could trust was LaCroix. She was getting over her negative feelings about him, but old habits died hard.

She must have dozed off eventually, because when she heard the sounds of a scuffle coming from down the hall, it took her several seconds to get her bearings.

She cracked the door open and saw Amaru trying to wrestle Vachon to the floor. Obviously, he was now fully conscious, but something was very wrong.

"What is it? What's the matter?" she asked.

The Inca gave her a panicked look. "CLOSE THE DOOR!"

But it was too late.

Vachon flung the Inca off of him and was on her in an instant, his arms pinned to the wall on either side of her preventing her escape. Immediately, she fumbled for the cross and felt her fingers fold around it.

"Vachon! No!" she said sharply. "It's me, Natalie!"

All he had on was a pair of loose-fitting pajama pants that she didn't think belonged to him. There was a lot of exposed skin and the cross would be an effective weapon if she had to use it on him.

His eyes had changed color and his fully-extended fangs were inches from her neck, but his expression told her the vampire was not in complete control, not yet. He was fighting it, but he knew he couldn't win.

His arms were trembling with exertion, and she realized he was trying to push himself away from her.

"Natalie . . ." he gasped, "make me stop. I can't . . ."

She shut her eyes because she didn't want to see what happened when she quickly brought the cross up in front of her and shoved it at his face.

He shrieked in rage, but she didn't think she had burned him.

When she opened her eyes again, Amaru had him under control for the moment.

With the cross held out in front of her, all she could do was watch as the Inca dragged his struggling twin back into the bedroom.

With wrenching force, he pulled Vachon into a viciously tight embrace and held him there, but despite the violence of the maneuver, his voice was calm when he spoke to him.

"Drink," he said softly.

Vachon hesitated only an instant before he sank his fangs into Amaru's neck.

Instinct told Natalie that this was something intimate, something she was not supposed to watch, but fascination kept her rooted to the spot. Except for the fangs-on experience with Nick, which she didn't actually remember, she had never seen any of them feed that way before . . .

The look the Inca gave her was undeniably hostile.

"Leave us!" he commanded her.

She shut the door and then jumped a foot when she turned around to find LaCroix behind her.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes, but Vachon . . ."

"He will be fine. Amaru knows what to do."

She followed him into the kitchen, still shaken by the close call and not quite ready to relinquish the cross she still held.

"How is Nick?"

"I don't think he remembers anything. For once it is fortunate that he is . . . wherever he is."

He removed several bottles from the refrigerator, including one containing orange juice. He poured a glass for her and then filled his own glass from one of the familiar green bottles.

Once, that would have repulsed her. She would not have been able to get the orange juice down. Now, it felt perfectly normal to be having breakfast at 4:30 in the afternoon with someone who drank human blood.

"LaCroix, do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

A raised eyebrow. "No . . . I suppose not."

"I've been wondering about something . . . When Divia brought you across, why weren't you poisoned, too? Why didn't you die?"

He ran his finger around the rim of his glass. "I've asked myself that. I don't know the answer. Perhaps it was because there was a mortal blood link between us as well as the vampire link.

"However, I think it is more likely that once she was brought across, she was in control of what she was. That we are physically superior to you is due in large part to the fact that we have an exaggerated ability to control our own bodies, and a heightened awareness of our internal make-up that extends almost down to the level of our very cells. It's not something most of us are actively conscious of until we are quite old, but Divia's master was an Ancient. It is entirely possible that she somehow attained the ability to use her poison selectively. In me, she saw a . . . companion—" he said the word bitterly— "not a victim. She did not poison me simply because it was not her choice to do so."

"Was it . . . your choice to be brought across?"

"Choice? I did not want to *die*, Dr. Lambert. That was my choice. There was no opportunity for me to fully understand the horror that Divia had become at the time."

She looked him in the eye. "And if you had understood?"

Ice blue eyes stared right back at her, "I still would have chosen not to die."

He has no regrets, Natalie thought. She was going to let the subject drop, but he went on to tell her the amazing story of how he'd been faced with the prospect of becoming a vampire or being suffocated by poison gas and buried alive in the blistering ashes of Mt. Vesuvius. She was not sure that she herself would not have taken the same path.

But then he added, "Even had the circumstances of time and place been different, Dr. Lambert, my choice would still have been the same. To me, the price of my immortality was never too high to pay. Perhaps that is the legacy of evil that Divia left to me, but more likely, it is why she chose me."

No regrets at all.

There were other things she wondered about. "When you left Toronto . . . You left money for me. I don't understand why."

"When we left, Dr. Lambert, I had no idea if you would recover. I knew you would live, but what the ordeal had done to you physically, and emotionally . . . Let's just say I recognized that you mortals are frailer than we are. I had to ensure that you would have the best care, as Nicholas would have wanted. I would have continued to provide for that as long as it was necessary. However, since you fortunately recovered, well . . . call it compensation for your pain and suffering, inadequate though it is."

He was telling her to keep the money. Damned if she wouldn't, too.

He finished his glass and gathered up the extra bottles he had taken from the refrigerator.

"Amaru will need this," he said.

She picked up the cross and followed him, but he made her wait outside the bedroom until he told her it was all right to come in.

Amaru was in his bed. Vachon was lying on the floor, but when he saw her, he got to his feet, quickly, easily.

LaCroix watched him warily, but even though the younger vampire seemed tense and edgy, he made no threatening moves towards her.

"Everything has come back," he said.

Natalie set the cross down and touched his face. His skin was cool, the way it was supposed to be. She checked his hands, his arms, and then stood back and looked him over. The spastic paralysis that had made it so difficult for him to control his body was completely gone.

He should have been happy, but instead, he looked miserable.

"I have to go out tonight, Natalie. It's been too long. The urge is just too strong."

She tried to offer encouragement. "You can control it, Vachon. I know that you can . . ."

He looked downward, embarrassed. "I don't want to. Not tonight."

She lifted his face and looked at him. The healing process

demanded blood, she knew that, and the trauma Vachon had suffered had been extensive. As a mortal, she could not comprehend what this Hunger did to Them, but it was plain he was suffering. This need physically hurt, and he'd had enough pain already.

"Vachon, it's okay." *I can accept what you are.*

Almost flippantly, Amaru added, "I will go along so he is not staked or burned in the sun like a stupid fledgling."

Vachon turned on him. "I don't need you!" he said angrily.

"I do not need you, either, *ayakonka*, but I am still going."

Vachon didn't want to hear this. He grabbed some clothes and stormed out of the room.

"The healing is not yet complete," Amaru explained for her benefit. "You would not notice the weaknesses, but they are there. I can sense them, and so can he. He is just too stubborn to admit it."

"It worked, though. Giving him your blood."

Amaru nodded. "Yes. He will be well soon . . . Do not hold your breath waiting for him to say 'thank you'."

Did she really want gratitude? She had given back to Vachon this dark gift that she herself would not have wanted, that Nick had never wanted, and because of that, at least one living, breathing human being was probably going to die that night . . .

She cut that thought short.

She could do nothing about what They were, and she could no more have let Vachon die than she could have any other thinking creature. Whatever Vachon and the Inca would do that night, it was because they were vampires, and not because of anything Natalie Lambert could control.

Vachon was climbing the walls waiting for the sun to set. Natalie tried to get him to drink, but oddly, he wasn't interested. He was literally too agitated to sit still.

She prepared his medication for him, the way she usually did, but he refused it.

"I don't need it anymore."

"You can't know that, Vachon."

"I do know it." He touched his hand to his head. "There was a funny way that it felt in here, before. It's gone now. It's not going to happen again . . . I'm okay, Natalie. Really. Okay." He gave her a smile that could charm scales off a snake, but it abruptly faded when Amaru joined them.

"Let's go," he told Vachon.

Natalie wondered if either of them had noticed they were dressed almost exactly alike.

Vachon gave her one last look. He wasn't asking her permission to go, he just wanted reassurance that she wouldn't hate him for it later.

"Vachon, I don't like what you have to do, but that has nothing to do with how I feel about you. Go. Just don't tell me about it."

Another hint of a smile and they were gone.

Natalie took the few minutes she had alone to make notes in her journal, perhaps the last she would write on Vachon.

Nick joined her as she wrote. He said nothing, but his attention was on her, not in that other place he occupied. He was shaved and bathed and the last traces of blood from the night before had been washed out of his hair. He was so scrawny, but still, she found herself thinking he was the most beautiful creature she had ever seen.

It crossed her mind that what had happened that one night between her and Vachon might be possible for her and Nick, but she quickly pushed that thought from her mind. He was stronger than Vachon had been, for one thing. Even as frail as he was, he still had the strength of a mortal man. She'd seen that when he'd hurt himself. She didn't know if she could stop him if he was determined to drink from her, and if he hurt her again, she wondered if either of them would survive it.

She took his hands and examined the fingers to make sure the splints weren't impairing his circulation. It was hard to tell. His fingers were naturally pale and cold.

He didn't flinch or pull away from her touch, the way he had before. His eyes stayed with her a long time—Nick's eyes, not the vacant stare of the psychotic half-vampire-thing he had become.

He remembers!

"Nick, Janette is coming. I think she can help you, make you well again." *Make you a vampire again.*

Did he understand?

For that matter, did she? She was going to give Nick back something he had always told her he didn't want. What if he preferred this oblivion to that hell? How could she even hope to know what she was about to do to him?

He took her hand in both of his, awkwardly because of the splints. He touched her fingers to his eyes and then to his mouth. At first she was puzzled, but then she made the connection.

"You will still be a vampire, Nick. There is nothing I can do that will change that." *And I can't, I won't, leave you like this.*

No shock, no revulsion, no reaction of any kind. She looked at his eyes. He'd left her again.

"I love you, Nick . . ." She touched his hair. "If it's gotta be a package deal, I can live with that now."

Twenty-Six

Janette arrived three days later, and she was just as Natalie had remembered her. Although the clothes she wore were simple, she managed to look regal and elegant in them, and she still carried herself with the same dignity and aristocratic bearing that Natalie had always found somewhat intimidating.

It was shortly after sundown, so it was Natalie who greeted her. LaCroix and Nick had not yet emerged from their sealed-off wing of the house, and Vachon and Amaru were off using the spa LaCroix had told her about to heat their bottles of blood by floating them in the hot water. Neither of them liked drinking the blood cold, and LaCroix had refused to pay for delivery of another microwave after the two vampires had forgotten—twice—to return with one.

Luckily, Natalie had been able to warm canned soup with water she'd put through the coffee maker. She had discovered the gas stove in the kitchen was purely cosmetic and hadn't been fueled in twenty years.

"I'm glad you're here," Natalie told Janette sincerely. "I'm happy you agreed to come."

Janette sighed. "I never could deny Nicolas, or LaCroix, for that matter."

"You aren't angry with Nick?"

"What Nicolas did to me, he did out of love. I understood that after I got used to the idea that I was a vampire again. Besides, it has afforded me opportunities to see that Robert's son is provided for that I would not have had otherwise. He will not want for anything, ever. And if eternity is his choice, he will have that, too."

"You would bring Robert's son across?!"

"Only if he wants it and only when he is ready. But it is a chance for a part of Robert to go on forever. If I had stayed mortal, I would be dead, and the child would have nothing. There is no reason for me to be angry at Nicolas . . . Where is he? I wish to see him."

"Janette, he isn't the way we knew him," Natalie warned her.

"LaCroix has told me. I have seen Nicolas in many of his 'states' through our years together."

"You haven't seen him like this. I just want you to be prepared."

"How bad is it?"

"He may not even know you."

Vachon and Amaru returned with their arms full of warm bottles and pulled up short when they saw the beautiful Janette. She immediately sensed they were vampires, and when Natalie introduced them, she seemed to sense something else as well.

She looked from one to the other and frowned. "Two of you, and yet you are the same . . . How is this possible? How were you made?"

They set the bottles down and Vachon stepped forward. "It is a long and dreary tale, milady, one with which I shall not bore you." He bowed and kissed her hand.

The Inca rolled his eyes and extended his own hand for a normal handshake.

Clearly, they sensed something strange in Janette, too. Vachon looked at her, puzzled. "You have *two* masters?"

"Yes," Janette answered him, and obviously was not going to provide a further explanation, even though Vachon and Amaru clearly wanted one.

"Would you join us?" The Inca motioned towards the bottles on the table.

The two of them almost tripped over themselves and each other waiting on her.

They used LaCroix's crystal, not the everyday ceramic mugs. Both of them set a goblet in front of her at the same time, except Amaru did it just awkwardly enough to knock over the one Vachon had just put down.

It was deliberate and juvenile, and Natalie couldn't believe that after five hundred years, men would still act that way.

Instead of making any move to clean up the mess, Vachon grabbed the Inca and threw him into the next room, which sent him tumbling into several pieces of furniture.

His dignity unforgivably compromised, Amaru came flying back—literally—and was about to return the favor when LaCroix appeared suddenly.

With one arm, the older, larger vampire pinned Amaru to the wall and in one lightning motion, he kicked Vachon's feet out from under him, knocking him flat on his face, and planted a foot on the back of his neck.

"Frolic . . . elsewhere . . ." he hissed.

Amaru nodded humbly and Vachon managed to choke out "Okay" before he let them go.

LaCroix then turned and greeted Janette.

She reached out her hands to take his, and then seemed surprised when he embraced her instead.

He stood back for a better look at her. "You look well."

"I am . . . Where is Nicolas?"

LaCroix's voice was subdued. "He is still asleep. I will bring him to you soon. But first you must know not to expect too much in the way of a reunion."

"Natalie told me. What is it LaCroix? What happened to him?"

"I will leave the technical explanation to Dr. Lambert. Just suffice it to say that the condition Nicholas is in may be quite upsetting."

Janette nodded, now appearing apprehensive.

LaCroix excused himself and Natalie and Janette retired to the living room when it became obvious that Amaru and Vachon were not going to leave them to a private discussion.

Of course, Natalie imagined that the two of them could and would listen to every word of her conversation with Janette, anyway.

"He is different somehow," Janette spoke of LaCroix when she and Natalie were alone.

"How so?"

Janette shook her head. "I am not sure how to explain it. Something that was there before is gone . . . Something that I never liked."

"I admit, he is not what I expected. He has taken good care of Nick. I can almost believe that he loves him."

"I have always known that he does, but his idea of love has always included total obedience. Nick would not give him that, which made him want it even more. He was obsessed with it. Now . . . I sense that is unimportant to him. Something has changed."

"Maybe it is because Divia is dead. Perhaps as long as she existed, part of her evil lived through him."

"Are you now subscribing to the metaphysical, Dr. Lambert?" She lifted her goblet—the one that hadn't been spilled—and sipped from it.

"I don't know," Natalie said thoughtfully. "I just know that he isn't the S.O.B. Nick made me think he was."

Janette laughed at that, but then became serious. "What is wrong with Nicolas?"

Natalie briefly explained the situation.

"What you are planning to do for him? How will I be of help in this?" she wanted to know.

Natalie explained the blood transfer procedure to Janette, along with her theory of why it would work. There would be no need to do a PCR on Janette. There simply was no one else.

Either her blood would be effective, or it wouldn't.

"Those two—" Janette indicated Vachon and Amaru—"you did this with them?"

"Yes. Vachon was very ill, in many ways worse than Nick. However, Amaru's blood was an almost perfect match for him, so there is really no way to predict if the results will be the same with you and Nick."

"How is it they are so alike?"

Natalie recounted what Vachon had told her about the way in which he and Amaru had been brought across.

"Twin vampires," Janette mused. "Interesting . . . They are not friends," she observed.

"I don't think they know what they are to each other."

Janette smiled. "Much like two other vampires we both know."

LaCroix entered the room with Nick behind him. Nick moved cautiously, careful of the sutures in his chest and abdomen, the way a surgical patient would be. Janette sensed his pain, and didn't embrace him.

Instead, she gently kissed him and stroked his cheek. "*Mon Nicolas . . .*"

Natalie felt a pang or two of jealousy when Nick apparently recognized Janette immediately.

She spoke to him in French and for a brief moment, it almost looked like he was trying to answer her, but then his face went blank and he turned his attention instead to a silver-and-turquoise bracelet she wore. He didn't touch it, but he seemed fascinated by it, and it was plain that he—*or Divia*—wanted it.

"You've been shopping." Natalie nodded at the bracelet. It appeared authentic, and was of the type that was widely available in the area.

"When the opportunity is there, one must take it." Janette smiled. She slipped off the bracelet and gave it to Nick, and gently touched the splints on his forearms.

She gave Natalie a questioning look. "Broken bones?"

"He does not heal as he should," LaCroix explained.

"And he does not speak?" Janette asked.

"No," LaCroix said sadly. "His mind is . . . impaired. He is not able to communicate. I trust the good doctor has explained her diagnosis to you?"

"Yes . . ." She put her fingers in Nick's hair, and he pulled away. "Tell me what it is that I must do."

Twenty-Seven

Natalie would transfuse Janette's blood into Nick right before dawn. This would give Janette the opportunity to feed well, and time to assimilate the blood.

Also, Natalie planned to leave Nick's blood, with the last of Divia's cells, to greet the morning sun where they would be certain to be destroyed. She had already hauled the microwave outside and pushed it into a sunny, open pit on the craggy surface. None of the vampires had wanted to touch it or go near it, not even LaCroix.

As the preparations were made, it occurred to Natalie that this might not be as easy as it had been with Vachon. She had asked him, and he did not remember anything. His coma had protected him from any pain or fear the procedure might have entailed.

Nick might not be as cooperative. Already, he seemed to sense that something was being planned for him. He would not leave LaCroix, and the look on the older vampire's face was even more solemn than usual when she told him it was time.

"Come, Nicholas," LaCroix said softly. Nick trusted him, and followed him willingly. LaCroix looked like he was leading a lamb to the slaughter.

In a sense, he was. This would be the end of Divia, and Natalie could not help but wonder how he was feeling about that right then.

Nick took one look at the medical paraphernalia she had set up and bolted.

LaCroix restrained him, but ended up needing assistance from Vachon and Amaru to get him down and hold him there. Three vampires held him easily, but he was struggling so fiercely that to Natalie, it seemed that he was willing to rip his body apart rather than let them do what had to be done.

Then, she realized that this was not Nick. This was Divia, who did not care what torment she caused Nick's physical body. She was not going to leave it quietly.

Finally, Natalie managed to administer the curare that quickly paralyzed him. He was still conscious, though, and the expression in his blue eyes was one of abject terror.

Janette stroked his head and tried to comfort him, speaking softly to him in French as Natalie worked as quickly as possible to insert the tubes that would carry his blood—and Divia—out of his fragile body.

Tears streamed down Nick's face as she worked, and that made it hard for her. She was physically hurting him, she knew, but worse than that, he didn't understand why and she couldn't explain it to him.

As soon as the process was underway, she turned to Janette.

"Your turn."

LaCroix took Nick's head between his hands, and knelt beside him. "It will be over very soon, Nicholas," he said gently. "I will not leave you. Do not be afraid."

In minutes, both vampires were as Vachon and Amaru had been, completely drained and clinically dead.

Natalie took a deep breath and relaxed, thinking the worst was over.

But then Vachon muttered, "Oh, shit . . ." and started backing out of the room, his eyes fixed on the bags of blood on the floor.

Natalie glanced down and mentally echoed Vachon's statement.

Nick's blood was *moving*!

The bags were pulsating as if what was inside wanted out. After each contraction, the soft plastic stretched and the bags expanded like obscene balloons.

The evil was almost palpable. What would happen if the

bags began to burst and what remained of Divia was freed?

Natalie envisioned classic scenes from old horror movies, Divia's errant cells running each of them down and overtaking them all.

It would have been funny to think about had she not seriously thought that was a real possibility.

She tried to think . . .

Why hadn't this happened with Vachon?

Frantically, her mind ran down a quick checklist while the three conscious vampires stared numbly at what appeared to be Divia's determined testimony that they would not, could not, prevail over her.

When one of the bags actually seemed to scoot a short distance across the floor, Natalie's gut reaction was to run, and get as far away from this thing as she could. To hell with Them and their netherworld demons!

But the scientist in her kept insisting that Divia was not invincible. *Something* had curtailed this reaction when she had been forced from Vachon's body . . .

The Dilantin. It had to be.

It inhibited electrochemical activity, and it was the only significant difference between Vachon's blood and Nick's that she could think of . . .

She yelled at Vachon to bring it to her.

He stayed right where he was, staring at the pulsing mass that was still Divia. He wasn't refusing her request—he knew better than anyone else in that room what Divia was capable of—he was simply too frightened to move. The air in the room was electrified, giving them all the feeling that if anyone moved too suddenly, *something* bad might happen. Vachon's fear had spread to Amaru as well.

"Where is it?!" LaCroix asked. Natalie told him, and he pushed past the two younger vampires and was back in an instant.

Natalie filled a syringe directly from the bottle and plunged it into the nearest plastic bag.

Abruptly, it stopped expanding. The pulsations slowed to stop.

Quickly, she injected the others.

"How do you like that, you little bitch?" she said when she finished injecting the last one.

Without wasting a moment, she gathered up Nick's blood. The transfusion would have to wait.

She ran outside with it and saw the first rays of daylight breaking on the horizon. She found the depression where she had thrown the microwave. Its bottom was sloped and its sides angled in such a way that it was in the direct sunlight for most of the day.

One by one, she tossed the bags into it. A couple of them burst on the sharp-edged rocks. The others would burst when the blood in them boiled in the coming daylight.

Natalie knew she must look and sound like a madwoman, but there was no one around to see or hear her when she yelled, "I beat you, you little whore! I've got him back, and you are nothing but ashes. Can you hear me? NOTHING BUT ASHES!"

Steam rose from the splattered blood as she ranted.

As her tirade wound down, Natalie could have sworn that something hissed at her.

❑❑❑❑❑

Nick slept through the day and well into the night.

Natalie was prepared for both him and Janette to awaken ravenously hungry, and LaCroix had stood a vigil, prepared with provisions.

Janette was twice Amaru's age, so the hunger that had almost seized control of him after his blood had been drained did not seem to affect her at all.

Nick, on the other hand, awoke with a violent compulsion to feed on anything that moved. Janette had replenished herself adequately enough by that time that she was prepared to deal with him as Amaru had done with Vachon.

Natalie knew letting Janette tend to Nick until he was calmer was for the best, and although she couldn't keep herself from resenting it, she understood that Janette knew instinctively what to do for him, perhaps even better than Amaru had, since her relationship with Nick was intimate in ways quite different from the one the twin vampires shared.

Still the idea that they were together again . . . *Life's a bitch.*

Luckily, Nick was not overpowered by the desire for a kill like Vachon had been. He'd had so many centuries of experience controlling those urges that once he had been nourished a second time by Janette's blood, he was able to exert that control. His mind was sound again.

In the aftermath, Divia's Last Stand in the Bouncing Blood Bags seemed comical, but Natalie could not get that living blood out of her mind.

How much evil had that child absorbed in her young mortal life and her short existence as a free and deadly vampire? What would she have become if LaCroix had not sealed her in that tomb for nineteen centuries?

Or, was this evil something that she was born with, something that only found added strength and purpose in the evil that surrounded her? How many others like her had there been, and what names did history know them by? Caligula? Vlad the Impaler? Hitler?

Her knee was hurting again. Marching over the godforsaken surface weighted down with that monstrous baggage had taken a toll on her physical being.

But she had defeated Divia. That gave her a feeling of power like none she had ever known. She could face anything now. The fact that Nick was a vampire seemed trivial by comparison. She loved him, and if she had to love the vampire, too, she now knew she could.

She popped a couple of Motrin and toasted her victory with a glass of grape juice.

❑❑❑❑❑

It wasn't until the following evening that she was able to approach Nick. He was not recovering physically quite as quickly as Vachon had, probably because Janette had not been an exact match for him, but he already looked so much better. He was alert and aware of his surroundings. Natalie knew that the instant their eyes met.

Their first moments together were awkward. Natalie had no idea how much he remembered, or what his state of mind was at that moment, and she was disheartened by the fact that he didn't seem to have anything to say to her.

She decided it would be best to keep the visit strictly professional.

When she checked the sutures, she discovered that his body had not only healed the injuries, but had forced the stitches out as well. His wrists still seemed tender, though, so she left the splints in place.

He fingered the red indentation on his chest where he had driven in the stake. "This was a pretty stupid idea, I guess."

It was the first thing he'd said to her and she wanted to throw her arms around him and hold him and not let him go. But she tried to keep a stern look on her face and said, "Yes, it was. You're damn lucky your aim was off."

"No sympathy?"

"None whatsoever."

He fixed that puppy-dog stare of his on her, the one that generally made her forgive him anything. Those deep blue eyes hid so much pain, yet could mirror such love and laughter back at her.

She felt her eyes fill with tears and she couldn't have stopped herself from embracing him if she had tried. "Oh God, Nick . . . I thought I'd lost you! I thought I'd never see you again."

He drew her into his arms, the way he used to, and it felt so good she cried even harder.

"It's okay, Nat. It's over now."

She pulled back, gently running her fingers across his face. "Is it, Nick?"

He took her hand and kissed her fingers. "I know what you're thinking. I'm still a vampire. Probably more of one now than I was before. But we can try again, Nat. We can try . . ."

"No," she cut him off, putting her fingers to his lips. "Not for me, Nick. Don't do it for me. I will help you like I did before if it's what *you* want, but don't put yourself through that because of me. I love you. I love you *as you are*. I know that now."

"But LaCroix . . ."

"He loves you, too. You will never convince me otherwise, so don't even try to use him as an excuse."

He suddenly became the old, serious, self-reproaching Nick again. "Natalie, you don't know what you're saying. What happened before could happen again . . ."

"No, it won't. I believe that, and you have to, too."

He smiled at her. "Are you saying 'love conquers all'?"

She kissed him. "Maybe it does, Nick."

Epilogue

Natalie had barely gotten through the door of her apartment when she was attacked by Sidney, who was howling for his breakfast. She filled his bowl to shut him up before she took off her coat and sorted through the day's mail. Amidst the bills and the junk mail was a small, sturdy cardboard box with no return address. She set that aside while she weeded through the rest of it.

It had been a long night, and she was tired, but even so, she had welcomed the routine of being back at her job. Dealing with dead bodies could be so much easier than dealing with live vampires, not that she had completely escaped the latter.

Thanks to some convincing, albeit bogus, medical documentation, Nick's bizarre disappearance had been directly attributed to the physical injuries he had sustained trying to protect Natalie from an unknown assailant. He had been reinstated on the force, although he was on a medical probation. Two serious head injuries in the span of one year had left his health open to question, to say nothing of his fitness for duty.

To avoid the risk of a delayed stress reaction triggered by working homicide cases, it had been recommended that he be temporarily assigned to vice. Rather than being upset by the implication that he was emotionally incapable of meeting the demands of a homicide detective, Nick seemed to be thriving in the more laid-back atmosphere, and was considering asking that the transfer be made permanent.

As for their personal relationship, they had yet to explore where that was going to go. She no longer hounded him about drinking blood, especially since, even though it was human blood he now preferred, many of his vampire characteristics seemed curiously suppressed. Natalie suspected it was partly because not denying himself somehow calmed his hunger, but she could not help but hope that, because Janette's blood had not been a perfect match for him, maybe he had not entirely overcome all of what Divia had done to disable the vampire in him.

It was her ironic hope that he would never recover those instincts and the demands they had placed on him. She had observed that while he now preferred human blood, his appetite for it was sharply decreased. Although he occasionally would feed well, there were other times when he had to be reminded to eat. Consuming blood was still a matter of survival for him, but it was no longer the focus of his existence.

What if—just what if—this absence of bloodlust extended to her blood as well? What if now, he *could* stop before he took too much?

Janette had already demonstrated that a mortal and a

vampire could have a physical relationship. And Natalie knew from her experience with Vachon that it was possible for a male vampire to be satisfied sexually without killing his mortal partner. She knew, too, that she was now emotionally able to handle making love one of Them, although she hadn't been able to reveal that to Nick. She wasn't ready for him to know that she had been with Vachon, and she'd have to tell him before anything happened between them and he found it out from her blood.

She had vowed that if there was any way to find out for certain whether or not Nick's instincts were no longer strong enough to drive him to kill her, that his appetite was now such that he would be satisfied enough to stop before that point, she would to do it. It didn't matter anymore to her what Nick was. She loved him, not the man, not the vampire, but Nick Knight the Package Deal, and she wanted everything that went with that.

She continued to study the nature of Divia's blood and its ability to disable and kill vampires, with the hope that it might provide her some sort of clue that would enable her to give Nick the mortality he wanted, without the costs Divia had exacted. Grace had been right about the cells behaving in a manner resembling a fungus infection, and after a crash course in archeobiology, Natalie had discovered that Divia's cells shared many common traits with a fungus commonly found in ancient tombs. Had she somehow found a way to conscript these primitive organisms and use them to her advantage, creating the new cells she needed to regenerate herself? It was frightening to think that evil that powerful could find its own way back from the dead. Was Divia really gone for good?

As for the other vampires in her life, only LaCroix had returned with them to Toronto. He said it was because there were many loose ends to be tied, and in part, that was true. There was the business of her abandoning the rental car in the middle of the desert, and the fact that the State of New Mexico wanted to be reimbursed for the needless search they had conducted. LaCroix took care of these things. He even managed to find new, and more lucrative, employment for the DMV clerk who had been fired for giving Vachon a driver's license. But, she suspected his real reason for wanting to be there was the same as it had always been. He wanted to be near Nick.

And, the old demon had shown he was grateful for what she had done in the only way he knew how. The last time she had checked her bank balance, she was a millionaire.

Janette had returned to her new residence in Seattle, but Natalie didn't know where Vachon had gone. He had said he would be back, someday, but she imagined that Toronto just held too many painful memories, not only of Screed, Urs and Tracy, but of the hell that Divia had put him through, which would have to be dealt with first. She suspected that wherever Vachon was, the Inca was not far away, nor would he be until Vachon either found new friends, returned to his old ones, or rebuilt his "family."

The latter thought no longer horrified Natalie. So Vachon would make new vampires. Who was she to say that he had no right to do that?

Natalie opened the box. Inside, wrapped in bubble plastic, was a little blue dinosaur with yellow polka dots, the same one her little godchild had made for her before she had died such an early and terrible death, the one which had been hopelessly shattered the night the Enforcer had come for Vachon.

All fifty-nine pieces were back where they were supposed to be. The cracks had been filled in and sealed, and the acrylic paint had been matched perfectly.

It looked exactly as it had the day Cindy had given it to her.

With it was a neatly penned note that read:

"Thank you, Natalie, for putting the pieces back together.

With love, J.V."

end

Girls' Night Out

by D. Echelbarger

Late spring, Toronto

Grace put on her coat when her shift ended at 5 p. m. and headed to the office to collect her paycheck. Okay, so it was only a notice-of-deposit, not an actual paycheck, but she still thought of it that way. Halfway there, she passed Dr. Lambert in the hallway, getting a cup of the swill that passed for coffee out of the community pot.

"Hey, Nat!" she called cheerfully. "Dropping by to get your check?" She'd noticed, when the schedule was posted, that Natalie had tonight off.

The coroner shook her head and turned to face her friend. "Just finishing up."

Grace thought she looked and sounded exhausted—pale, with dark circles under her eyes and a defeated droop to her shoulders. "You mean you've been on duty since *last night*?" she protested. "Girl, you've been working way too many double shifts lately."

"Couldn't be helped." Natalie shrugged the problem off. "Chang called in sick; there was no one else to cover."

"The corpses would've waited," Grace insisted, but she knew she'd never convince Natalie. This was an argument they'd had many times before. Nat always held that work came first.

"But the criminals wouldn't," the doctor replied, as always. She sighed and rubbed her eyes. "Look, I'm almost done with the write-up. I'll go home when it's finished."

"You do that," Grace insisted, knowing too well how easily her friend could get side-tracked into "just one more test."

Natalie smiled tiredly at her and disappeared with her coffee back into the lab.

Grace was heading for the outside world when Nick's partner entered the building.

"Hey, Grace," Tracy called. "You ordered some popcorn from my nephew, didn't you?" She clutched a large box awkwardly to one side and held a Buckstar's cup in the other hand.

"Yup," the technician agreed. "You delivering?"

"Uh-huh." The blonde pushed the box onto a counter and started to burrow inside. "What'd you order?"

"Two of the microwave kind." Grace extracted her wallet and traded cash for two plastic tubs. As Tracy ticked her off the list, Grace noted another name on it. "You can deliver Natalie's while you're at it," she suggested to the detective.

"She's got tonight off," Tracy objected.

"Pulled a double shift again," the tech explained with a significant look.

"Again?" Tracy scowled. "She's going to burn out if she doesn't ease off."

"That's what I keep telling her, but she doesn't listen." Grace glanced at a copy of the local free entertainment weekly that someone had left on the counter, and was struck with an idea. "Detective Vetter, you're Dr. Lambert's friend, right?"

"Well, yeah."

"Me, too. And as her friends, we want to help her unwind, right?" Grace pushed the paper toward her and tapped one ad significantly.

Tracy's eyes widened, and a mischievous grin, twin to the one Grace was wearing, curved up her mouth. "Yeah . . ." She giggled.

❑❑❑❑❑

Nat had honestly meant to leave after writing up the Lamm report. But then Detective Starokin had called, asking about that DNA test, and one thing had led to another . . .

It was almost seven when Grace and Tracy swept through the doors and bracketed her, one either side of her desk chair.

"You're working too much," the detective told her.

"You told me you'd leave over an hour ago," the tech chimed in.

"I was going to," Nat protested, "but first—"

"It's always 'but first'," Grace cut her off, and Tracy unaccountably giggled. "Not tonight, girl. You—" she pointed sternly at Nat— "are taking the night off." She grabbed the coroner's left arm in both of hers.

"That's right," Tracy agreed, and grabbed Nat's right arm. "You need to relax, and Grace and I are here to see you do. Right?" She spoke over Nat's head, to the tech.

"Right," Grace agreed.

"But—"

"No buts," Tracy cut Nat off, and giggled again. "Not yet."

Grace snickered, and between them they levered Nat to her feet.

"I've just got to finish—" the coroner protested half-heartedly, but Grace overrode her.

"No, you don't. Ain't nobody here won't still be here tomorrow, girlfriend. *You*," she added decisively, "need a night out."

"And we're gonna give you one," Tracy chimed in, on cue, and pulled the desk chair out from under Natalie's knees. "Let's go."

Nat protested a few more times, mostly for form's sake. Actually, she was flattered that her friends cared enough about her to go to such lengths. And it *had* been a long time since she'd had a night out. . . .

❑❑❑❑❑

After dinner at a nice restaurant—they let Nat pick; she chose Italian—the trio piled into Tracy's car and the detective drove across town, ignoring both Nat's requests to be dropped off at home and her queries about where they were going.

When she pulled into the parking lot, Nat looked puzzled. "I thought this theater closed down a while ago?"

"It did," Grace agreed, her tone innocent. "Tonight's the grand re-opening. I saw it in the paper."

"Oh." Nat considered that a moment. "What's showing?"

Grace hesitated, and Tracy leapt into the breach. "It's a showcase for performance artists," she explained, straight-faced. "The best talent in Toronto will be on-stage tonight."

"Really?" Nat sounded intrigued.

"Absolutely," Grace agreed, and buried her face in a Kleenex, apparently wracked by a veritable paroxysm of sneezing.

"Sounds interesting." Natalie opened her car door. "Let's get inside before all the good seats are gone."

"Oh, yes." Grace nodded. "We do want good seats."

"Definitely," Tracy agreed, and ducked her head so Nat wouldn't see her grin.

❑❑❑❑❑

The club's previous incarnation had been a dinner theater, and small two- and four-seat tables were still scattered around the floor. They were bare except for flickering red hurricane candles and a beer and wine list. The stage was backed by black velvet curtains and projected into the room, with narrow extensions to both sides. A spiral staircase stood at the end of the left-hand runway and a pair of brass poles occupied the end of the right-hand one.

Tracy bought tickets for the three of them, and Grace selected a table that stood almost under the stage, slightly to the left of center. Nat tried to talk them into one a little farther back, so they would have a better overall view, but her two companions overrode her.

"Believe me, Nat," Tracy insisted with a very odd smile, "for some of these artists, you *want* a close-up view."

Grace agreed emphatically, and settled into her chair.

Their waiter, who was dressed, oddly enough, in black satin shorts, a red cummerbund and bow tie, and nothing else, introduced himself as Tony and asked for their drink orders.

"White wine," Nat said.

"Oh, c'mon girl!" Grace protested. "Live a little! I'm gonna have a Long Island Iced Tea. And run us a tab," she added. Tony nodded.

"Grace's right, Nat," Tracy added promptly. "Try something different; it's not like you're driving. Mai Tai for me," she told the waiter.

"You *are* driving," Nat pointed out.

"No, I'm not," Tracy corrected her. "I called my brother. He'll collect the car from the parking lot and we'll take a taxi home." She leaned forward, a mischievous smile quirking up the corners of her mouth. "C'mon, Nat. Isn't there something you've always wanted to try, but never had the nerve to order before?"

"Well—" Nat hesitated, then, at the encouraging nods from her friends, gave in. "I'll have a—" she cleared her throat, and finished quickly— "sex-on-the-beach." Tracy and Grace exchanged triumphant glances as Tony solemnly recorded her order and departed.

As they waited for their drinks to arrive, Nat glanced around the rapidly filling theater. *Odd,* she thought idly, *the only men in the club are waiting tables and tending bar. All the customers are women.* That was, in her admittedly limited experience, rather odd. Theaters usually drew a fair number of couples, even if they specialized in feminist pieces.

Before she could comment on it, the house lights blinked twice, and the milling crowd quickly found their seats. Tony distributed their drinks and continued on his way, tray crowded with glasses.

Nat picked up her drink—which was an interesting shade of orange-red—and sipped it cautiously. It was surprisingly good, but very potent. She decided to make it last as long as possible.

The house lights dimmed for the final time, and a man in a white brocade smoking jacket, black pants, and a blood-red Ascot stepped from behind the curtain, microphone in hand. With a mild shock, Natalie recognized one of the Raven's former bartenders.

"Good evening, ladies and—ladies," he said, his middle-European accent making the words somehow suggestive. "We have for you tonight a truly outstanding selection of the best 'talent' in Toronto. I'm certain you are all eager for the show to begin, so I won't keep you in suspense any longer." He backed toward stage left and intoned, one arm flung dramatically outward, "Miki's is proud to present—Gorgeous George!"

The audience screamed, the curtains parted—and Nat stared in shock.

The man who stood thus revealed had undoubtedly been a bodybuilder. His skin-tight WWF T-shirt outlined every bulging pec and biceps. The knit pants he wore clung to calf, thigh . . . and more northerly territory . . . in a way that left very little to the imagination. He grinned at his audience and strutted forward, flexing his muscles and twisting his torso this way and that.

The crowd responded with whistles, shouts of encouragement, and the occasional "Show us what you got, honey!"

She was, Dr. Lambert realized belatedly, sitting front and center at a male strip joint.

She turned left to protest to Tracy, but the younger woman's attention was riveted on the stage. As Nat watched in disbelief, the detective put two fingers in her mouth and executed a piercing, high-volume whistle, which caused George to turn her way and execute a bump-and-grind that was *definitely* aimed at her.

Nat blushed; Tracy just grinned and took a swallow of her Mai Tai.

The doctor turned to her right, where Grace sat—but found no help there. Grace was tossing back her drink with reckless abandon—the glass was already half gone—and leaning back in her chair, watching the stripper with frank

appreciation.

Wishing she could just quietly slip away, Nat did the next best thing. She downed a slug of her drink.

George, meanwhile, had reached the left-front corner of the stage, and was engaged in removing that tight T-shirt one centimeter at a time, to the enthusiastic encouragement of the audience. Once it was off, he whirled it three times over his head and let it fly into the crowd.

Every woman in that part of the room seemed to be fighting over the trophy, Nat noticed as she raised her glass again.

Meanwhile, George swaggered the length of the stage, pausing every now and then to strike Mr.-Universe-type poses. When he reached the far end of the right runway, the stripper slowly slid the pants off, with many suggestive movements, revealing one of the briefest, tightest, *purplest* sets of jockey shorts Nat had ever seen. It wasn't a g-string—quite—but it was darn close, and the color was just short of fluorescent.

The audience screamed approval as George went into a sort of pseudo-gymnastics routine, holding the pants stretched tight between both hands while executing a series of bumps, grinds, and body-flexings.

By the time he exited the stage, Nat wondered if she'd *ever* stop blushing.

The emcee returned, amid thunderous applause, whistles, and shouted approval—Nat's tablemates among the rest—and announced the next number.

It was a chorus line, with half-a-dozen well-synchronized men in briefs and bow ties a la Chippendale's moving to "Loverboy." At the same time, the waiters fanned out through the crowd taking orders for refills. Before Natalie could protest, Grace had ordered "The same all around." It was only then that Nat realized her glass was three-quarters empty.

She didn't remember drinking that much. . . .

The next round arrived as the dance number ended. The emcee—Miki? No, Miklos, that was what Nick had called him —raised his microphone. "And now," he announced with a flourish, "Harley and Davidson!"

The curtains didn't part. They were pulled aside by two lean-but-muscular men. The one on the right sported a thick blond flat-top, the one on the left had a black ducktail. Both were dressed in tight black leather and mirrored sunglasses. As the women in the audience whistled their approval, the two pseudo-bikers strutted forward, playing tough-guy to the hilt.

Half-way to the front of the stage, the blond's elbow caught ducktail in the ribs. Ducktail turned and pushed flat-top's shoulder, and the two leather-clad toughs faced each other, lips snarling, hands balled into fists.

The crowd abruptly silenced, and Nat wondered if her professional skills would be needed.

Then ducktail grabbed flattop's sleeve and the jacket split in half, pulling free to reveal a tank top with the Harley-Davidson logo.

The audience, realizing the "fight" was part of the act, relaxed and took sides. Nat noted with amusement that Tracy was cheering for the brunette. She cheered for the blond, strictly for fairness' sake, as she gulped her drink.

Within minutes, the men's breakaway costumes were lying in pieces on the floor, and all that was left between them and a public indecency citation were two black leather jockstraps, appropriately studded.

They circled each other, still keeping up the fight pretense, but now posturing visibly for the audience as they moved through a series of stylized judo moves.

The blond flipped his opponent over his shoulder—and off the stage.

Ducktail did a truly spectacular mid-air roll and landed on his feet, knees flexed and fists clenched at hip level—on top of Natalie's table.

The trio snatched their drinks before they toppled, and found themselves with a truly close-up view of the dancer's —kneecaps.

The blond did a forward flip, landed on the neighboring table, and called tauntingly to his partner. Nat couldn't hear what he said through the crowd's cheering, but ducktail's reply was to lock both hands behind his neck and throw his left hip sharply outward.

Nat moved back hastily to give him room, and glanced over at the blond. He copied his partner's pose and shot his left hip forward, then his right.

Ducktail responded with a three-move routine.

Flattop countered with four.

Nat, who was beginning to feel the day's tension unwind, slewed her chair around so she could see both dancers and polished off her drink. *This could get interesting,* she thought, absently placing the empty glass on the floor next to her chair.

The anything-you-can-do bit lasted a good five minutes, and ended when the chorus line entered—this time in blue briefs, police caps, and billy clubs. At this signal, both dancers leapt back onto the stage and backed out on opposite ends, still mock-threatening each other.

The crowd loved it.

The chorus line started another number—"Every Breath You Take." Nat set her second, still-full drink on the table and leaned forward, squinting against the glare of the stage lights. She could swear she'd seen the second cop from the end before, in a *real* uniform. . . .

Number followed number, stripper/dancers alternating with the chorus. Grace and Tracy kept ordering refills. About the time her third sex-on-the-beach arrived, Nat stopped worrying that someone would see her there and joined in the fun, calling encouragement to "Zulu", a tall, lean black stripper who was posturing on stage in a fringed-leather g-string, using a long, feather-decorated spear as a prop.

The chorus line came back, dressed in black-fur briefs, ears—and tails—and started moving to the tune of Elton John's "Honky Cat."

The final act of the night was "The Great Randini," a stage magician whose tricks invariably caused a piece of his costume to disappear or fall apart. By the time he was reduced to a red-satin g-string and a top hat, the crowd was roaring with laughter and approval. As a final trick Randini bumped-and-ground his way to the edge of the stage, rolled his obviously empty topper down one bare, well-muscled arm, brim outward —and mysteriously called into existence a double handful of Mardi Gras-style bead necklaces, which he tossed to the applauding women. Nat couldn't figure out *where* he'd hidden them—the man certainly didn't have any sleeves left—but she

leapt for the prizes as eagerly as the others, and managed to snag a bright orange string a second before Grace.

Grace, who was on her fourth Long Island Iced Tea, stuck out her tongue at her friend, then grinned as Natalie draped the fluorescent beads over her severely businesslike taupe suit.

Randini bowed himself off the stage to thunderous applause, and the house lights came up. Nat, feeling decidedly tipsy, glanced around the club.

Roughly a quarter of the women were clutching a string of beads, or some other trophy from the night's entertainment. A few looked visibly drunk, but most just seemed relaxed, laughing and chatting with their companions as they finished their drinks and prepared to depart. With a smile, the coroner turned back to her friends.

"This was a great idea," she announced, and polished off her drink. "Thanks, guys."

"Any time, honey." Grace grinned and fingered the silk scarf around her neck, a souvenir of "The Arabian Knight," who had performed a variation of the classic seven-veils number.

Tracy agreed, twirling the paper umbrella from her Mai Tai before adding it to a row of similar tokens in front of her. She hadn't tried for the beads or anything else thrown to the crowd, but she seemed content with the parasols, and Nat wasn't in a mood to argue with her.

Or with anybody, really. She was more relaxed than she'd been in ages, and wanted to enjoy it while it lasted.

The three women gathered their possessions together —Tracy tucked all four umbrellas, tidily furled, in the breast pocket of her jacket—and made their way through the thinning crowds to the door.

It took ten minutes in the cool night air to snag an empty taxi, and when they were crowded into the back seat, Grace gave the man an address downtown that Natalie didn't recognize.

"Hey, wait a minute," the coroner protested, not too fervently. "It's getting late! Shouldn't we be heading home?"

"One more stop," Grace replied.

"You'll like it," Tracy added, retrieving a purple parasol and twirling it between her fingers.

"Oh, what the hell!" Natalie leaned back into the corner and relaxed. Wherever they were going, it had to be more interesting than sitting at home alone. Might as well make a night of it.

❑❑❑❑❑

They thought she was drunk, Tracy could tell. But she wasn't. She'd slipped away during the first chorus number, and given the waiter $20 to insure that all her Mai Tais after the first would be the 'virgin' variety. Too many years of watching her mother get drunk every night had left their mark. But she'd discovered long ago that she could have just as much fun *pretending* to be drunk as actually getting drunk. More, in fact, because she never had to worry about hangovers.

As the cab pulled up to the bistro, she wondered if this was really such a good idea. It had *seemed* like one when she'd spotted the ad, and Grace had agreed, but now she wasn't so sure. . . .

She was sitting on the curb-ward side of the cab, and so was the first out. A quick glance around showed no sign of a certain conspicuous teal-blue car, and she began to worry that they wouldn't have a chance to put the plan into effect.

Tracy paid off the cabbie—and gave him the purple parasol—and they pushed through the doors into the café.

And there he was. Nick Knight was sitting in a corner table nursing a barely touched glass of red wine and looking gloomy, as had become usual lately. Good, so her plea for him to meet her here for "help on a case" had worked. That had been the shakiest part of the plan. The rest should be easy.

Grace spotted him a second later, and promptly steered Natalie in that direction.

Tracy, not wanting to let on that this was a set-up just yet, peeled off and made her way to the piano bar on the other side of a divider topped with potted palms. She watched covertly as Grace "noticed" Nick sitting there and maneuvered Nat into the seat next to him. Natalie was, Tracy saw with some surprise, a little wobbly on her high-heels.

Dragging her attention back to her own part of the plot, Tracy pulled a $20 out of her pocket and dropped it in the piano player's tip bowl. "Play 'As Time Goes By,' willya?" she asked with a grin.

"Sure, lady!" The pianist did a few idle runs, then launched into the classic.

Casablanca had always been one of Tracy's favorite movies, and the song just seemed to fit those two, somehow. Although why Nick, who was obviously as crazy about Nat as she was about him, hadn't done something about it years ago was beyond Tracy's comprehension.

She pulled another umbrella—the yellow one—out of her pocket and opened and closed it idly. The waitress came by, and Tracy ordered mineral water with a lime twist. She stuck the umbrella through the twist, just because.

Grace arrived at the piano bar as the pianist finished the song, and suspended a ten over the tip jar. "You know 'Tell Her About It,' by Billy Joel?" she asked.

The man nodded, and the bill dropped inside. Grace ordered coffee.

They kept the songs coming—love songs, relationship songs, anything to give the couple in the corner a nudge in the right direction.

It seemed to be working. They were sitting there, talking quietly, heads together. But then Nick squeezed Natalie's hand and rose, making his way around the planter.

"Tracy?" He frowned faintly. "I thought you wanted to talk to me about a case?"

"Uh, hi, Nick!" Tracy gave him her best I'm-a-dumb-blonde-you-expect-me-to-be-sensible? smile and wiggled her fingers in a silly wave. "Um . . . not really. I mean, it worked out without you. Really. So I just decided not to bother you with it."

"Oh?" Her partner looked skeptical, glancing suspiciously between the two women.

Grace pretended not to notice. Tracy, determined to distract him, pulled a third umbrella out of her pocket and offered it to him.

"Here!" she chirped. "I brought you something!"

Nick gave her a very peculiar look, and took the parasol by its long, pointed wooden stick as if he thought it would bite him. "Thanks," he said, with a notable lack of sincerity.

But he went back to the table to sit with Nat, so she forgave him and requested "Wind Beneath My Wings." She was running out of love songs, her feet hurt, and she found herself wishing Nick would for God's sake *take the hint* and take Nat home with him. Or something.

❑❑❑❑❑

Natalie was most definitely tipsy. Maybe she wasn't drunk, but she was in no fit state to see herself home, of that Nick was certain. When he returned to the table, tucking the green umbrella idly into his shirt pocket, she was leaning both elbows on the table, chin cupped in her hands and hair streaming about her face.

She smiled blearily up at him. "Hi, stranger."

"Hello." He sat next to her and tried to get her eyes to focus on his. "Nat, I think you should go home, don't you?"

"I tried," she assured him solemnly, and yawned. "They wouldn't let me. They made me come here." She straightened, and picked up her drink in one hand while the other toyed with a string of garishly orange, cheap plastic beads around her neck.

"I'll take you home, Nat," Nick coaxed, his most persuasive smile at full blast. He placed one hand on her arm, shaking it slightly to get her attention. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Huh?" She blinked owlishly at him. "What?"

"Do you want me to take you home?" he repeated, enunciating carefully.

Natalie gave him a broad, pleased smile. "Yeah!" She nodded, then yawned again. "Take me home, Nick. I'm tired."

"Let's go, then." He helped her to her feet and slipped an arm around her shoulder when she wobbled. Together, they headed for the elevator to the parking garage where he'd left the Caddie.

Grace and Tracy watched them go with delighted grins.

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By the time they got to Nat's apartment, she was asleep. Nick retrieved the keys from her purse before carefully lifting her and carrying her upstairs.

He put her down on the couch, slipped off her shoes, then fetched a quilt from her bedroom and tucked it around her.

His hand was on the doorknob when he remembered something from his brief stint as Schanke's roommate, last year. A quick search produced a bottle of aspirin from the bathroom, and there was orange juice in the fridge. He poured a big glass and placed it, along with the bottle, on the coffee table where she would find it when she woke up. As he straightened, he felt a sharp stab from his breast pocket.

It was the cocktail umbrella Tracy had given him.

Nick considered it for a moment, then grinned. He opened the gaudy green thing and stuck it in the orange juice, balancing it over one edge with care.

Then he turned the lights out, kissed Nat on the forehead, locked the door behind him and went home.

end

Blood Hunt

by Janice Cox

"Damn it!" The small brown-haired woman rubbed futilely at her numb fingers. This morning the radio had promised a brief respite from the oncoming fall chill, and so she'd left her gloves at home. Now it was almost dark, and the wind snatched greedily at the remaining warmth in her exposed fingers and ears. Carefully setting down the bag of supplies, Angie bent down and retrieved the keys.

A moment later the big door swung inward and she sighed with relief as the warm air brushed at her face. The heater was on, as were the lights in the back. The lights over the bar were off, and the strong smell of gin filled the air. Underneath the gin there was another odor, not immediately recognizable.

"Mister LaCroix? Joe?"

The only reply was the dripping of a faucet over at the bar and the gentle hiss of the central heater. Carefully locking the door behind her, Angie crossed the darkened room, pausing to set down the bag near the door marked Employees Only.

"Joe?"

Nothing.

She sighed dramatically. "I swear, if you've been hitting the sauce, the boss is going to kill you. Give me a hand with this stuff, will you? I picked up more nuts, but I really don't know why we bother. Half the time the stuff just goes stale. Never seen a place where the customers ignore the free lunch before . . ."

Angie set the nuts down with a disgusted bang.

"Hey, no kidding, you'd better get it together. The boss'll be in soon, and that is one dude you don't want to piss off.

"Joe?"

Sounds of water dripping at the bar, but no reply. Angie fumbled for the light switches which would light the bar itself.

"C'mon, this isn't funny. This place is creepy enough without you—" Her diatribe cut off in midstream, Angie tried to scream but all that squeezed from her throat was a whispery "hhaaa" as her feet took unwilling steps away from whatever—whoever—was on the bar.

"Oh, my God . . ."

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"Oh, my God."

"Why don't you step outside, Tracy? See if anyone saw something."

Tracy Vetter shook her head resolutely. "No, I'm fine, really. It just . . . I haven't seen anything this bad before. I'll be fine."

Nick Knight took in his new partner's pale, green-tinged complexion and mentally rolled his eyes. "Sure you will. I just thought you needed some fresh air."

"Nick? I think you should see this."

Knight gave Tracy one last look, then turned toward the body on the bar. Natalie was kneeling at one end, her feet and knees narrowly avoiding the pooling blood.

"Have you ever seen anything like this? I've seen weird, but this is . . ."

She paused as Tracy approached.

"What's up?" The young detective looked determinedly professional.

"Well, I was about to tell Nick that this woman wasn't tied down with ropes." She lifted a red, sticky coil from one pale ankle with a wooden examination stick. "Never seen someone tied down with their own intestines before. Thrifty fellow, this one."

"Ooohph. Nick, I think I'll . . . go talk to the crowd outside." Tracy turned and walked unsteadily toward the front doors, now propped open.

"That wasn't very nice."

"She'll get used to it. We all do."

"Indeed. Nicolas, might I have a word with you?" LaCroix, whom the patrolmen had kindly introduced to Nick as the bar's owner, was standing behind them.

Nick nodded briefly. "Nat?"

"Don't worry about me. I'll be here for a while yet." The coroner turned back toward the figure on the bar. "This looks like the beginning of a very long night."

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"You know, of course, that this little matter must be cleared up as soon as possible."

The two men had walked away from the crowd of police, forensics expects and photographers that surround every violent death like flies over rotting meat. They paused at the rear wall, where LaCroix leaned casually against the black stone.

Nick nodded. "The captain has put several of us on it already. Anytime there's a case like this, the media starts in right away, and that kind of attention always makes things worse."

"That isn't the attention that I'm concerned with. What does concern me, Nicolas, is that this woman was found here, in this manner, and with that particular message." He gestured abruptly toward the bar.

"'Pain is fleeting. Blood is eternal.' Yes, that does look bad. Is there any chance that . . .?"

"That one of our own would do something so foolish? Come, come, Nicolas, none of us are that foolhardy. They would not dare," he added softly. For a moment LaCroix's true

face appeared, then the murderous predator was replaced by a look of arrogant disinterest.

"I'll admit it seems unlikely, but . . ."

"But, of course, anything is possible. Yes, I will make inquiries. But you won't find your killer here, Nicolas." The older man turned away, then paused.

"And Nicolas? If you intend to play by mortal rules of justice, see that you find him first."

Wonderful. With LaCroix seeking vengeance for the inconvenience of having to redecorate, a very nasty case was about to get nastier. Nick shook his head wearily, and headed back toward the crime scene. Just being in The Raven was painful now that Janette had moved on, and that dull ache was accompanied by pity for the young woman displayed like a side of beef on its long, wooden bar.

The call came in about four hours ago from a nearly hysterical head waitress named Angie Delgado. She had been hired by LaCroix to take care of the tedious details of running a downtown nightclub, and was now at St. Thomas's, sleeping the sleep of the heavily medicated. Miss Delgado had not been too useful, having come in after the killer had made his presentation and left, but she had stated that the door was locked, and that there had been no sign of a break-in. And since LaCroix did not follow Janette's habit of sleeping in the attached private quarters, there was no one to hear as the killer eviscerated and then tied the young woman to the oaken bar. He had then taken his time with her, pausing only to paint the cryptic message on the bar's mirror with the victim's own blood. The look on her face was . . . disquieting.

She had lived much longer than she could possibly have wished to.

Tracy was back when he returned to the bar, patiently lifting prints from the bar's smooth, waxed surface. She was overseen by Jack Thompson, one of the department's forensics experts. At Nick's inquiring look he nodded, pursing his lips in surprise. Tracy was doing okay.

Natalie approached him, taking off her stained latex gloves.

"Nick, we're going to take her downtown. I don't think we're going to get much more here."

Nick nodded. "Have you been able to establish the cause of death?"

"Well, gee, I don't know. Maybe it was the shock and blood loss from the skin he took, or maybe when he cut her from stem to stern and removed most of her internal organs. Could've been the impromptu cardiectomy. Or maybe it was pulling her finger- and toenails that was the straw that broke—" She stopped abruptly, putting one trembling hand over her eyes. "I'm sorry, Nick. I guess this one's getting to me, a little."

He put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I know. No matter how often we see it, violent death is never easy to deal with. Especially when . . ."

"When they've been tortured," she finished wearily. "I can't give you anything definite, but I'd put death at about five hours ago, due to traumatic blood loss and shock. Give me a couple of hours and I can be a little more precise."

"All right." He squeezed her shoulder briefly before releasing it. "I'll call you later, huh?"

"Hold it!" The sharp voice that brought their heads around belonged to a tall, dark-haired woman, who gestured peremptorily to the attendants who had been rolling out the victim's body. She bent and quickly unzipped the body bag, seemed satisfied with what she saw.

"Can I help you?" Natalie moved first, stepping angrily between the body and the stranger. "This is a police investigation. I'm afraid you'll have to wait outside."

The woman gave Nat a calm, measuring look.

"I need to speak to whoever's in charge here."

"That would be me." Nick flashed his shield. "Detective Knight, homicide. And you are . . . ?"

"Keller. RCMP violent crimes."

"I wasn't aware that the department had called you in, Agent Keller."

"They didn't." She gave him another long, measuring stare, then turned toward the bar. "Nice work. Have you identified the victim yet?"

"Not yet. Her purse is missing, and getting a good set of prints is going to be . . . tricky."

"Generally is, when the killer cuts off the pads of all their fingers. Who discovered the body?"

"We have her. And you haven't explained what you're doing here, Agent Keller." Knight put one hand on her arm and held it firmly. "We've got the situation under control, I can assure you. Perhaps you'd like to explain how you heard about this so fast."

Keller irritably turned to face him. "This case belongs to us. I've been tracking this guy across half of Canada, and believe me I know his signature. And I'll thank you, detective, to take your hand off me." She coolly reached over and placed her right hand over his where it still rested on her arm.

Contact.

Nick jumped slightly and pulled his hand away as a shiver of something cold ran through him. Keller didn't react immediately, instead staring blankly at nothing before slowly bringing her eyes up to meet his. Her eyes narrowed speculatively, even as her left hand slowly massaged her right.

"Nick? Are you okay?" Nat's concerned voice brought him back to reality.

"It's nothing. I was . . . just explaining jurisdiction to Agent Keller."

"Yes." Keller took a step backward. "I'll see that you have the appropriate paperwork by morning. In the meantime—" She broke eye contact with difficulty "—I'll need to see whatever your people have picked up here, and a copy of the coroner's report ASAP." Her eyes returned inexorably to Nick's face. "Our man's not done here yet. We've got another day or two of fun and games before he moves on." She shook her head and turned to face the bar. "I expect I'll be here for a while. Can I reach you at the precinct, detective?"

"I'm off at six, but I'll be in tomorrow night."

"Then I'll see you then."

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"What was that all about?"

"I think she knows, Nat."

"Who the killer is? What makes you say that?"

Nick looked briefly over at Tracy, who was perched on the end of his car, deep in thought over her notepad. He lowered his voice.

"I think she knows what I am."

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"Captain, I need to talk to you." As Reese looked up, Nick walked in and closed the door behind him. "It's about the murder at The Raven. I know that the RCMP is claiming jurisdiction, but I really think that the case needs a local angle . . ."

Reese sighed. "Come in, Detective Knight. Have a seat." He gestured magnanimously toward the chair Nick was leaning over. "I know which case you're talking about. We ID'd the lady after you went off shift." He slid a file across the desk. "Lady was one Danielle Correlli, 24, single, and a nanny, if you can believe that. Didn't think they still had nannies, for God's sake. We ID'd her through a missing persons report."

"How long had she been missing?" Knight looked up curiously.

"Her employer reported it when she didn't appear for work yesterday morning." The captain frowned.

"But she hadn't been missing even 24 hours yet. Why did Missing Persons . . . Oh."

"You got that right. Miss Correlli just happens to have been the nanny for Jessie and Ryan Gershwin."

"Children of one Frank Gershwin, mayor of Toronto," Nick finished.

"That's two for you. So now we've got the mayor's office jumping up and down, not to mention the usual noise from our friends in the media. Lord, don't they just love the messy ones. Everyone's looking to us, and what do we get, but a visit from the RCMP."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I think it would be a good idea if one of us was assigned to the investigation. To provide a local angle, coordinate precinct activities, that sort of thing." Nick leaned forward, meeting his captain's eyes. He disliked influencing mortals unnecessarily, but this was certainly necessary. A moment to concentrate, and . . .

"And that makes three. It would appear that our esteemed colleagues over at RCMP agree with you. I just spoke to Agent Keller, and we got everything set up. She's going to brief each shift, starting with the night shift. Briefing's in fifteen minutes, so don't waste any more time talking to me.

"And, Knight? I understand you met Keller last night. Any comments?"

"Not really, Captain. She seems professional enough. Any reason?"

Reese grinned. "I guess you made quite an impression on the lady. She asked for you by name."

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"Can I help you?" Natalie Lambert wasn't quite able to keep the irritation out of her voice as she greeted the RCMP officer she and Nick had met last night. Nick seemed to think the woman was some sort of psychic, but had been less than forthcoming in telling Nat just what he thought the woman knew.

As if that was anything new.

Too many years of keeping secrets had made Nick tight-lipped enough that sometimes the urge to just *shake* the answers out of him was nearly insurmountable. As usual, Nick was cryptic and Nat was on her own. Reaching up, she switched off the recorder which took her verbal autopsy notes.

"Yes. I need to see the autopsy report on the Correlli woman." The taller woman looked blandly at Nat, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened last night. Wordlessly, Natalie handed over the report.

Keller nodded, then began scanning the pages immediately. After a couple of minutes, Natalie sighed loudly.

"Agent Keller, do you need me for anything? My patients are getting antsy."

That seemed to get her attention.

"By all means. I'll need to see the body, of course."

"Of course. Third one from the end. There's a box of latex gloves to your right."

"Mmm." Keller nodded absently, already back to the careful details of Danielle Correlli's death. Natalie shrugged mentally. Nothing out of the ordinary here. Personality had never been a requirement for service with the RCMP . . .

When Natalie next looked up, she was surprised to see that nearly an hour had passed without interruption. Even the departure of Agent Keller hadn't shook her concentration. That thought led naturally to the body of Danielle Correlli, lying still in bay three. Natalie headed over on autopilot, already mentally laying out her final report. She rounded the corner file cabinet that had bitten her shins on numerous occasions without a blink and stepped directly up to the body.

"I'm cold . . . so cold."

The whisper was thin, pitiful, and soft as a—voice from the grave?—child's.

"Ahh!" Even as she gasped and stumbled a panicky step backward, Natalie cursed herself for reacting like an intern. Bodies don't talk. Or whisper.

Nick's did, her traitorous mind reminded her.

Belatedly she realized that the sound hadn't come from the body's head, but from the side. Standing still as stone, her face pale and waxy, was Agent Keller, her hand tightly grasping Ms. Correlli's left hand.

"Agent Keller?" Natalie took a hesitant step forward.

Oh, this is weirder than snake shoes.

"Agent Keller?" she repeated. "Are you all right?"

The dark-haired woman blinked rapidly, her breath coming in several short sips before settling into a normal sinus rhythm. Her free hand went absently to her hair, smoothing a rebellious strand into place.

Abruptly she looked up at Nat. Absolutely calm.

"Did you say something, Dr. Lambert?"

"Yes," Natalie said warily. "Are you okay? You looked a little rocky there for a minute." *There's an understatement,* Natalie added mentally. "Did you say something about . . . being cold?"

"I said it looked like *she* was kept cold," Keller said

smoothly. "Your report doesn't mention it, but I found small amounts of tissue damage in the extremities, and signs of drying in the mucous membranes and lips."

"All of which are consistent with exposure. It's cold outside, Ms. Keller. I didn't find any evidence to suggest that there was anything unusual in sustaining cold exposure symptoms in winter in Toronto. There's nothing here," Natalie tapped the table lightly for emphasis, "to indicate otherwise. And that's what goes in my report."

"Of course, Doctor. I didn't mean to question your findings." She handed Natalie back the case file. "If you'll forward your findings on to our office, I'm sure that will be sufficient for our records. I'll leave you a number where I can be reached, if you come up with anything else." Keller handed her a business card with a cellular phone number scribbled on the back, then turned to leave.

"Oh, and Doctor?" Keller paused, then looked over her shoulder. A mischievous grin flicked briefly across her face, then was gone. "She *was* kept in the cold."

The double doors swept shut behind her while Natalie was still trying to formulate her reply.

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". . . Keeps them prisoner for several hours before beginning his work. He picks them up within two hours of dusk, then gets down to business at roughly dawn. Time of death is from two to six hours later. He's getting better at prolonging his pleasure, so we're looking at an TOD of about eighteen hours from pick up on the next one. We don't know what he's doing to them during the night, but the depleted levels of epinephrine found in the bodies suggests that the torture and death was just the end of a really bad day."

"Any description?" Nick asked inquiringly.

"Pretty standard. White male, thirties or forties, medium build." Keller nodded at their responding groans. "We've got witnesses that rented him a room in three cases, and each one of 'em has a different take on the guy. We know he's about six-foot tall and 180-185 pounds, but he's worn a wig and/or contact lenses when setting up his rentals, so we've got nothing there. He doesn't leave bodily fluids behind, so we've got no blood type."

"So what do we have?" Tracy asked impatiently. "If the RCMP has been working on this case for three months, you must have put together something."

"Yes," Keller replied, coolly meeting Tracy's eyes. "We know his victims are white, generally middle-class, very respectable. They tend to dress conservatively, and in one case the gentleman was a priest. We know he picks them up shortly after dark, and that he keeps them prisoner for several hours, which means he's got a place nearby which is private and soundproof. We know he'll choose one more victim here in Toronto before he tries to move on.

"We also know that he's broken his routine. His last victim was left in a local nightclub, where all of his previous kills were left in an unused space: an unrented apartment, an empty warehouse, places like that. Something made him change his pattern, and I'm going to find out what.

"In the meantime," she concluded, dropping off the edge of the desk she'd been sitting on, "we're asking all patrols to keep an eye on things in the area around the club, and near the churches and libraries. You've got copies of the police artist's sketch. What I need from you is your eyes. This guy's not superman. He's rented an apartment, he's got to eat, he's got to clean up his messes. Keep me informed, and I'll be out of your hair as soon as possible.

"Any questions?" She looked blandly at Tracy. "Was that clear enough, detective?"

"That's it? You're just going to wait for him to kill again?" Tracy asked incredulously.

Keller walked lazily across the room toward Tracy and Nick.

"Why, yes, detective. Heck, if we caught 'em before they killed anybody, why, there wouldn't even *be* a homicide department, and then where would we be?" Keller's voice had dropped to a dangerous drawl, and Nick could see the other officers watching avidly. Even cops like to see a little blood drawn sometimes . . .

Nick dropped one hand on Tracy's shoulder as she opened her mouth to reply.

"Why don't we head down to the car? You did say that you wanted us to check on the local churches, right? Late mass will be getting out soon." As he spoke, Nick looked around at the other officers, who began to file out of the squad room.

"I just think that we could be doing more," Tracy continued stubbornly. "What about a decoy? You said yourself that we know his type. We could get some of our undercover people . . ." She trailed off as Keller shook her head.

"We tried that twice. He hasn't taken the bite."

"He must be psychic," Nick said lightly. As he said it, he watched the RCMP woman carefully, but her only response was an irritated glance shot in his direction before she began to collect her notes.

"Or just smart. Most cops have got a look . . . Too tough, not, I don't know, victimish enough."

"Tried it yourself, did you?" Nick grinned. To his surprise, she returned it ruefully.

"Sure. Spent all night cruising the churches and late-night libraries. Got sore feet and five illicit proposals. He's just too smart for that," she repeated.

"Still, it seems like our best shot," Tracy persisted. "If we use someone local, someone who looks like a housewife or a student more than a cop . . ." She trailed off. "Why are you guys looking at me like that?"

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"My feet hurt." Tracy's voice came through the wire clearly. "Guys? You still there?"

Nick reached forward and pressed the SEND button.

"We're here, Tracy. Why don't you just stay there. You could read your book, look distracted."

Tracy sighed. "Yeah, that sounds good. I think we're coming up zero, here, guys."

Keller leaned back in the Caddie's passenger seat and rolled her head over toward Nick. She began to open her

mouth, but Knight beat her to it.

"It's the sign of a noble mind not to say, 'I told you so'."

"That's something I've never been accused of having." She stretched, then looked at her watch. "It's almost midnight. If he was going to hit tonight, he would have by now."

"You're right. Why don't we give it a few more minutes, then I'll drop you back off at the station. You can get a fresh start in the morning."

She grimaced, whether in response to the idea or to the cold coffee she was sipping, he couldn't be sure. "No, I've still got work to do tonight."

They sat in silence for several minutes, watching Tracy pretend to study at a bus stop. Keller finished her coffee with a look of disgust and began to idly twist a strand of rosary beads through her fingers. Lost in thought, she didn't see Nick's look of surprise and wariness as the beads began to wend between her fingers.

"You're Catholic?" Nick said, forcing his voice to a calm he didn't feel. After last night's eerie experience, he'd been sure that Keller was sensitive, that she'd picked up on at least a part of what he was. And now this no-nonsense officer was casually playing with her rosary, after first ensuring that they'd be alone together . . .

"Eh? Oh, no," she shook her head decisively. "A set just like this was found at the scene of the last murder," *This set, as a matter of fact,* she added mentally. "I need to know how this guy thinks, what his motivations are. We find out why he does it, we'll know when and who before he hits again.

"So why do you do it, Nick?"

"Do what? Go around killing coeds?" He nodded out to where Tracy was sitting, straining to keep his voice light.

She grinned politely, but the smile never reached her mouth.

"Why are you a cop? You've got a condition which severely limits your hours You don't make friends much within the department or without. You prefer to work alone. And you certainly don't need the money. What makes you tick, Nick?"

"You've certainly done your homework. Checking up on me?"

She shook her head in dismissal. "Just like to know who I'm working with."

Now why don't I believe that? Nick shrugged casually.

"And here I don't even know your first name." He half-turned in his seat so that he was facing her directly. "Don't you trust me, Agent Keller?" He pushed out mentally, seeking the mind behind those questioning eyes.

Hard blackness, unyielding. Behind it, something shifted, stirred. The predator awakening.

"Nick? Hey, guys?" The next thing Nick knew, Tracy's voice filled the interior of his car, and Keller was looking at him curiously.

"You going to answer that, or should I?"

"I've got it. Yes, Tracy?"

"I'm about ready to call it for tonight. What do you think, partner?"

"Sounds good. I'll pull around the corner to the north. Meet us there in five minutes."

"You got it. See you in a minute."

What happened? Nick knew from long experience that many sensitives were resistors to one extent or another, but never in eight hundred years had he felt anything quite like that. Her mind was like an obsidian blade: sharp, cold, and utterly black. Blank? No, her shielding was good, but it was more than that.

She was a hunter.

SLAM!

The loud noise jolted him from his reverie. Many years as a cop brought his right hand to his shoulder holster before he had consciously identified the sound as the slamming of his passenger-side door. Keller was standing outside, leaning in through the open window.

"Think I'm going to hang around, see what I can pick up. Why don't you take Tracy and hit the all-night book store? I'll give you a call if I come up with anything."

Nick recovered quickly. "Sure. I've got a few things to check out myself. You going to make it back all right?"

"I'll try not to get mugged. And Nick? It's Sam."

"Sam?" he looked at her blankly.

"Samantha. You know, my name?"

"Right. I caught that." Nick grinned, and released a long, slow breath.

"What a detective. See you tomorrow night, Knight."

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The killer watched as the blonde woman jumped into the Cadillac, which then pulled smoothly back onto the street and toward police headquarters. Young and sweet, that one. She would cry and plead, of course. They always did. Learning to appreciate the transitory pain, to see beyond it to the dark realm waiting, took time. He would spend many hours patiently instructing her, and in the end she would see. She would see not with her weak mortal eyes, but with eyes opened through pain to see the Dark Lord who waited just beyond . . . Thinking of how it would be caused a chill of anticipation to run through him. She would learn her lesson well.

But not just yet.

The Man, now . . . Shadows enveloped that one, shadows like he'd seen only time before. The Man's mission was surely like his own. He would understand why Azoth had made the offering of entente the night before. Perhaps he would even warn The Man about the one who watched Azoth, but did not learn.

Perhaps.

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"So this police officer may be a threat to us. How untrusting of you, Nicolas. Perhaps there is hope for you yet. So tell me, what do you intend to do about it?"

LaCroix leaned forward to rest his elbows on the table in his private recording studio, his fingers neatly steepling themselves between them. His eyebrows raised in a parody of innocence, LaCroix waited patiently for his progeny's excuses.

"I don't know. She checked out my record, and it looks like Merlin's work held up. And she's here to catch a killer, not look for vampires. She was much calmer tonight. I'm

hoping that she'll just let it go, pass it off as nerves." Even as he said the words, Nick knew he was being unrealistically optimistic. "I just thought you should know," he finished lamely, "in case she shows up here again."

"Why, Nicolas, you've managed to put your finger directly on it. She does indeed 'catch killers' as you so aptly put it, and our hands are so very bloody. What makes you think that she will ignore the evidence of her senses? Even if she is not certain of what she has seen, do you truly think that she will simply 'let it go'? If she is half of what you suspect, you know she will not." LaCroix smiled narrowly as Nick looked away.

"Perhaps I should rephrase my first question to you. What do you want *me* to do about it?"

"Nothing." Nick turned quickly back to face his old master. "I'll handle it."

"As you have before, no doubt. The Enforcers don't appear to share your high opinion of your abilities in this matter. Or have you forgotten, Doctor?"

"No. I haven't forgotten." Nick clenched one fist in remembered guilt. More than a hundred years ago another mortal had found evidence of their existence, and the Enforcers had efficiently eliminated that evidence. And the mortal who possessed it. More recently they had reappeared in his life, and he had narrowly prevented another such senseless death. "Are they here? So soon?"

"I have not seen them. But, of course, one rarely does. Even if they are not, Nicolas, they undoubtedly will be soon. And if they are forced to take care of *your responsibility,*" he emphasized clearly, "they will doubtless not be amused. I may have been able to intercede for you once, but I doubt I would have such luck again.

"For your own sake, I suggest you clean this up quickly. If they have seen this morning's papers, they almost certainly will be here soon. Now, if you will excuse me, my public awaits," LaCroix rose gracefully, and gestured with one gloved hand toward the door of the studio.

Nick nodded soberly.

"I'll take care of it."

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"Blood Stalker Strikes Again!"

The headline screamed up off the page loudly enough to give Agent Samantha Keller, RCMP Violent Crimes, a headache. Frowning, she rubbed her temples slowly, eyes tightly closed. The all-night diner's lights were offensively bright, and buzzed like an angry nest of hornets. Still, it was a momentary break from the frustration that had been building since she'd first been assigned this case. The usual hunches which filled in the blanks left by standard police investigative techniques where almost completely absent from this case. This killer spoke to her only in half-heard mutterings and mocking laughter which led her only to where he had already been.

Except of course in her dreams. Dreams which left her trembling and drenched in sweat, remembering nothing but the swish of a descending knife. It had become simpler, of late, not to sleep at all. Eyes still closed, she took a last sip of the coffee, silently thanking God—or whoever was listening—for the miracle of caffeine.

"That gonna do it for you, hon?" The smell of Juicy Fruit gum and the whisper of a ticket hitting the table announced the presence of the waitress before the woman had even opened her mouth. Sam opened her eyes reluctantly. The ticket had come to rest neatly in the middle of the condensation her water glass had left, and all that was visible of her server was her ample backside.

"No, thank you. It was lovely, really." She looked down at her plate of congealing scrambled eggs and half-cooked hash browns. Yum. At least the coffee was decent. Dropping a five on the table, Samantha headed toward the waiting dark.

It was nearly two o'clock by the time she reached The Raven. Yellow police tape still criss-crossed the heavy wooden door, with more of it littering the sidewalk to either side. The doorknob didn't respond to a polite tug, nor did the door respond to the not-so-polite pounding she gave it.

"How rude."

It wouldn't be that difficult to call the station and get someone to contact the owner. Who would doubtless be less than pleased to open the door for her at 2 a.m. Why bother him? She'd catch up with him sooner or later. Right now the scene of the last crime beckoned. By tomorrow the final forensics inspection would be over, the nightclub cleaned up. It would be as if the torture and murder of Danielle Correlli had never happened.

"Not this time." Glancing casually down both sides of the street—it would be extremely embarrassing to be offered a ride downtown by Toronto's Finest—Keller slipped a flat black case from the rear pocket of her jeans and knelt in front of the front door.

"Bingo." The door opened inward slightly into the coal black interior. "One minute, ten seconds." She slid her set of lockpicks back into her pocket, then carefully stepped inside. The light switch to the left of the door brought dim light to portions of the dance floor and walkways. Stuffing her gloves into one pocket of her oversized jacket, Keller pulled out a small tape recorder and clicked it on.

"Method of entry was a small skylight on the northwest corner of the building. Skylight is not visible from the street, suggesting that he had been inside the building at least one time previously.

"It would have been dark inside when he arrived, with only the skylight itself for illumination. Victim's prints on one table suggest that he set her down in order to clear off the bar area. No evidence of binding with artificial materials has been found. She sat there and waited for him to come back . . ."

Keller's monologue continued as she approached the scene of the murder itself. Lost in her report, and in the whispers that filled her head with each step, she didn't see the door which opened slowly out into the bar. A figure in black stepped silently out into the darkness.

"No excessive blood spray was found. Tissue and fecal matter were not spread throughout the room as has become customary, and, in the absence of religious items, no sacrilegious displays have been found. *Alter such a holy place? These will understand this offering, this gift on the altar of wood and blood,*" Keller continued, oblivious to the

way her voice deepened, roughened.

"Holy place? Where the hell did that come from?" Clicking off her recorder in disgust, she irritably began to stuff it back into her pocket. This place was getting to her. It happened, sometimes. Like in that . . .

"Some people take their amusements very seriously," a spectral voice intoned.

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"Thanks, Nick. I'll see you tomorrow night."

Tracy Vetter waved at her partner as he pulled his non-regulation Cadillac away from the curb and back into traffic. *Ow.* The tenseness of the evening had left her with stiff muscles and frazzled nerves, which complained heavily now that the excitement was over. She rubbed absently at one shoulder as she continued towards her apartment.

"Excitement? That's a laugh. Just another fabulous night on the job with Tracy Vetter, girl detective," she muttered, heading up to the lobby doors on autopilot. Nick hadn't said anything, of course, but she knew that he was coming around to the Keller woman's side on the whole stakeout idea. That woman . . .

"Hmmph," she added to herself, digging for her apartment keys. "Walking in like she owns the place. I may have to take that crap from the other shields, but no way is some, some, outside help going to tell me how to do my job. Ah! Here we go." Catching the keys, where they had been hiding at the bottom of her purse she unlocked the lobby door. The lock had stiffened with the recent freeze, and she had to shove slightly to get the stubborn door open.

Movement.

Out of the corner of her eye, as she shoved against the door, Tracy caught a glimpse of something. Someone? Sticking one foot on the door to hold it open, she turned and leaned back out into the cold.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

Nothing. At three in the morning not too much was stirring in her upper-middle-class area. Not even the barking of a dog stirred the still night air. She sighed and shook her head.

"That's it. No more midnight horror films for you, kiddo." Yawning, Tracy pulled the door shut behind herself and headed toward the waiting elevators.

❑❑❑❑❑

Outside, something separated itself from the shadows and moved with chilling ease up the fire escape at the side of the building.

❑❑❑❑❑

"Hi, honey, I'm home!" Tracy sang out cheerfully.

"Oh. I forgot. I'm not married." Definitely too much TV.

Tracy shrugged off her coat, and dropped it over the coat rack by the door. Hitting the light switch by the door brought the lights on, followed immediately by warm air as she turned on the heater. She headed immediately for the bedroom, where she quickly stripped out of the layers of her "shy little victim" clothes. Looking suspiciously at her blouse, which she hadn't worn since college, Tracy took an experimental sniff.

"Ugh. Time for the laundry basket, you. And you, too, Trace," she said firmly to her reflection. The bedroom mirror offered no reply.

"I'll take that as a yes."

Ten minutes later Tracy was in heaven.

"Ohhh. I really should do this more often," she sighed, sinking deeper into the hot bubblebath until only her head and shoulders remained above water. Taking an oversized wash cloth, she began methodically rubbing her tired skin clean of dirt and stress. A bubblebath was *so* relaxing . . . She really had to make time for this more often. Why, she could almost go to sleep right here. Almost . . .

❑❑❑❑❑

"Wha? Huh? I'm up, I'm up." Tracy brushed something cool and damp away from here face and sat up with a start. "What did I . . . Oh, rats."

The police siren that had awakened her was fading slowly as it passed her apartment building. The bath water had cooled to being just slightly too cold to delay any longer, and she clambered out quickly. The heater had apparently shut itself off, because the bathroom was now very chilly to her wet body. Toweling off quickly, Tracy put on the pajamas she'd thought to lay out beforehand and headed sleepily towards her bedroom.

Opening the bathroom door brought her wide awake as a blast of frigid air slapped at her face. The lights were out in the living room. *Did I do that? Can't remember.* She started to walk into the room, then froze.

Wait. Let your eyes do the moving. Don't be a target. With relief, Tracy felt her academy training coming back to her. *Movement. Look for movement.* Flattening herself against the door frame, she scanned the room cautiously. Light from the street lamps outside caught the slow movement of her living room curtains as they fluttered in the cool air. The window behind them was ajar.

"Vachon?" Pulling something like this would probably be his idea of a joke. *He's probably hiding behind the couch with a corny black cape on. Probably lives for times like this.*

Right. Vachon might be many things, but he wasn't the type to pull a cruel stunt like this. *Now can that, Vetter, and think. Where's your gun? Purse. Bedroom.*

The stillness of the room did nothing to relieve her nerves. Putting her back to the wall, Tracy edged down the hall toward her bedroom. The lights weren't on there, either. The purse was where she'd left it, on the middle of her bed. Did she leave it unzipped? It was now. Take a deep breath. Walk across the room. Move!

"Traaaacy." This sibilant whisper stopped her in her tracks. Where was it coming from? Never mind. Get your weapon. She had reached the bed and grabbed her purse when the voice came at her again.

"Traaaacy. So soft, so pure. You wanted me to come to

you, Tracy. Now here I am. Aren't you glaaad?" The voice seemed to come at her from all directions, mocking her. How did he know her name?

Oh, God.

Two important realizations hit Tracy at the same moment that her closet door slammed open.

This wasn't a burglar.

And her gun was no longer in her purse.

❑❑❑❑❑

"You really shouldn't sneak up on a police officer," Samantha managed in a voice which was *almost* entirely calm. Quietly she reholstered her pistol and took a deep breath before meeting the stranger's eyes.

She knew who he was, of course. The mysterious owner of The Raven, who also happened to be late-night radio's Nightcrawler. He managed to look calm, damn him, as if people drew deadly weapons on him every day. Hell, with his reputation, maybe they *did*. It didn't explain how he'd managed to get the drop on her. Nobody did that.

He was looking at her with a mixture of amusement and irritation.

"I trust that you have an explanation for this late-night intrusion, Detective . . . ?"

"Agent Keller, RCMP." She flashed him her badge.

He shrugged as if the distinction was unimportant.

"That still doesn't answer my question. It was my understanding that you people were finished here. At least, your Commissioner assured me that this was so." Of course he was baiting her, but there was something else there. Tension? Interesting.

"This part of our investigation will be closed when I say it's closed, not before. If you have any problems with that, here's the number of the RCMP office in Montreal." She handed him a business card with a hand which shook not at all, and which he took with elaborate politeness. Underneath their ritual, an undercurrent of tension had developed which could be cut with a knife.

"I'm sorry if I disturbed you, Mr. LaCroix. It was my understanding that you didn't use the living quarters here. Were you expecting company here tonight?" His wintry smile as she slipped into Interrogation Mode didn't do anything to improve Keller's disposition.

"Not at all. But, murder investigation or not, I still must work." He gestured with one black-gloved hand toward a dark corner, where she now remembered a recording studio lay. "Now, is there some way that I can help you?"

❑❑❑❑❑

Nick Knight sighed in frustration.

Since The Raven was temporarily closed, he'd been forced to rely on other methods of getting information on the vampire community. Perhaps because they were all forced to keep silent among the majority of the population, vampires were notorious gossips when with their own kind. Comings and goings were always noted, commented upon, and occasionally acted upon, even in a city the size of Toronto. If a renegade had come to town, someone would have heard by now.

No one had heard a thing.

Of course, the body found at The Raven was public knowledge, and fodder for many a long night's discussion. Common wisdom suggested that, if the killer was one of them, that he or she was clearly insane. No one would have the effrontery to commit something so public. Especially not in LaCroix's territory. If he didn't correct the problem, common opinion continued, the Enforcers certainly would. And if it wasn't a vampire, then it was of no concern to them. Either way, no real problem.

All of this meant that Nick had wasted the last few hours of darkness the night had to offer. Screed had generously offered to scour the city—for a price, of course—but with the general description that they had, Screed would have had half the men in the city brought to Nick within a single night's time. Each for the set bounty, of course. Vachon had been carefully uninterested when Nick mentioned that Tracy was involved in the investigation, and had nothing of value to offer. Disgusted, he returned to his car and signed himself off duty. Maybe a good day's sleep would make things clearer.

Headed back toward his apartment, Nick reflected on his other pressing problem. LaCroix, damn him, had been right. If Samantha Keller knew what he was, she could prove to be very dangerous to the entire community. More than once during her briefing earlier this evening, he'd caught the flat, greedy look of a professional hunter in her eyes. A hunter who hunted for the joy of it, not the necessity. She was clearly tenacious, and unlikely to be squeamish about doing whatever needed to be done to get her man. Even if that meant accepting the reality of vampires.

Still, tonight she'd been much calmer, even friendly in a detached, professional way. Maybe he'd imagined the connection, the sharp feeling of being invaded, seen for what he truly was. Perhaps she would, as he'd suggested to LaCroix, simply pack up and go home when this case was done.

And "perhaps" pigs would fly.

The police scanner suddenly came to life, muffled by the classical music pouring from the Caddie's speakers. Out of force of habit, Nick turned down the music and brought the scanner's volume up.

"Disturbance reported at 1025 N Blackwood, corner of 17th and Wilbur. Possible domestic disturbance, units are advised to proceed with caution."

Ten-twenty-five Blackwood?

"Tracy." Flicking on the car's police lights and siren, Nick pulled the Cadillac into a sharp U-turn. "Eighty-One Kilo responding."

❑❑❑❑❑

The interview had gone downhill from there.

Samantha Keller walked down the alley behind The Raven, hands clenched in frustration. It was a new feeling. Normally her instincts whispered things to her about her subject that a straight dialogue wouldn't reveal. Things like

motivations, hidden personality quirks. Guilt. Now those instincts had cut out twice.

"Great. First with the killer, now this guy. Why couldn't I have been a teacher, like mama wanted? I doubt many of them spend a lot of time hanging out in such glamorous places." She kicked disgustedly at the dirty snow. "I'm missing something big. I know I am. Something huge." She rubbed absently at her forehead above her left eye, which had started to throb. First Knight, who wasn't *human*, somehow, and now LaCroix. He had been very careful to keep her from touching him "accidentally", but the feelings that she had managed to get from him were even weirder than what she'd picked up from Knight. They'd fenced around each other for most of an hour before calling it a draw, and she'd left with little more than she'd gone in with. Damn the man! He was so smug, so . . . infuriatingly self-confident. If it wasn't for the initial tension she'd picked up from him, she wouldn't have even tried to pursue her line of questioning.

Not that it had done much good anyway. She leaned back against the back wall of the Raven and closed her eyes, trying to wish away this damn headache. Instead something clicked inside.

Soft, deep laughter. Pleasure and satisfaction at a job well done, at the rewards which would come. Boots dropping into the snow. The sound of heavy boxes being shifted. The slide of metal on metal, the smell of fetid air. A man's form in darkness, lights from above. He stopped. Started to turn. In another moment, his face would be visible in the flickering light. He continued to turn. There was the edge of a smile . . .

PAIN! Bright, agonizing pain that shattered her left eye and sent lancing pain deep into her head. Samantha staggered forward with the force of it, reeling into a half-filled garbage can. Control, control . . . Deep breaths. Where is he?

A living room. Warm, dimly lit. A blonde woman on the floor, blood pooling beneath her. The crash of splintering wood. A demon with the form of a man . . .

"Tracy."

❑❑❑❑❑

Tracy lay among the shards of glass from her bedroom mirror, watching numbly as the beast approached her. From far away she could hear the sounds of someone breathing unsteadily, making mewling sounds of pain with each intake of air. The sounds were unimportant.

What was important was the man-beast in front of her, above her, looming like a dark angel. He smiled a terrible smile, full of wisdom and compassion as he stretched out a hand toward her. In his hand was a gleaming knife, its tip covered in blood.

"Now, now, my dearest child. There is no need to struggle. All will become clear to you. My instruction is a hard one, but in the end you will see His face, and understand all. Come. Let us begin." He knelt before her, resting his blade against her collar bone. His free hand gently stroked her hair, then caught it brutally at the base of her neck. Slowly he began to trace the fine line of her collarbone, leaving a deep trail of welling up blood behind it.

The pain was sharp, bright. It screamed loudly in her head, blocking out the madman's hypnotic words. With a convulsive shudder, Tracy threw off the lethargic stupor that had been encompassing her.

He was trying to hypnotize me! Tracy thought in amazement. She glanced carefully up at his face, but the killer seemed unaware of his loss of control, instead humming softly as he completed the line he had begun. The pain was bad, but not being able to resist had been far worse. One of her hands seemed to have been pinned behind her when she fell, but she stretched out her other, hoping to find a weapon, any weapon.

"Much better. Let's get more comfortable, shall we?" He lifted her effortlessly into the air and deposited her roughly onto the bed. Tracy landed with a thump, her head lolling limply to one side, her eyes closed.

"Not so soon, my dear. I have so much to show you." The man who called himself Azoth set a small, delicate blade down beside the bed, along with a large-lidded jar. Tenderly he brushed the hair from her face, then bent over her as if to tenderly kiss her goodnight.

"NO!" Tracy's eyes flew open as her hand slashed upward. Her hand, with its long, sharp shard of mirrored glass, impacted solidly with the killer's face, the tip of the blade sliding into his left eye with sickening ease. He jerked back out of her grasp, his one eye widening with almost comical surprise while one hand reached up toward the horror of his face.

He knelt above her on the bed, and Tracy managed to get one knee firmly into his groin as she twisted out from under him and off the bed. She had a moment to reflect that he was human enough for *that* to affect him before she ran for the bedroom door.

Go for the phone? Call for help? No time. Get outside. Get— The world spun alarmingly around Tracy, and she stumbled to the living room floor with a thump. Behind her, she could hear footsteps staggering down the hall. She struggled for her feet, then gave up and began to crawl hopelessly toward the front door.

What did he do to me? Can't move, can't breathe. Wha . . . The world began to tilt, and black flowers appeared to block her vision as it grew grayer and grayer. Through the roaring in her ears she could hear the killer behind her, his voice thick with rage.

"You *dare* to hurt me? I will make you beg for death. You suffering will be le—"

A loud sound in front of her blocked out his words, and suddenly Nick was there, looking so . . . strange. He was standing where her front door had been, and the light from the street lamps had caught his eyes, making them shine brightly in the dark. *Like cat's eyes, or like* . . . The answer suddenly seemed unimportant as her head became too heavy to hold up any longer. . . . *like* . . .

"Vachon?"

❑❑❑❑❑

Tracy's whisper seemed loud to Nick's heightened senses.

Her breathing was shallow, the blood smell powerful in the room. A trail of her blood led back into the rear of the apartment, back to a tall figure with gore streaming down one side of his face. Shoving the splintered door away, Nick launched himself at the man.

And missed.

The surprise was worse than the momentary pain of impact. How . . . ? The man was mortal, Nick had no doubt of that. No human could have moved that fast. He spun around to see the man kneeling behind Tracy, holding her limp body in his arms.

"Perhaps I have overstepped myself, good sir. Is she your pet? Fair of hair and skin, young and comely," the man continued, tenderly stroking her pale skin. "We are much alike, you and I. Both preying on these weak bags of flesh. But while you feed your own beast, I feed our Dark Lord." He looked down at Tracy, then shrugged his disappointment. Through the open window, they could both hear the scream of approaching sirens.

"Alas, she is no longer of any use to me. A pity. She and I had not yet begun to play." Standing quickly, he let Tracy's limp body fall to the floor as he began to back slowly toward the open door. Nick took a step toward him.

"Ah, ah! While I would greatly enjoy a dance, I think you, sir, have more pressing concerns. Or don't you hear what you are not hearing?" The man took another step toward the door, smiling slightly.

Hear? The only sounds that Nick could pick up were the sounds of the patrol cars pulling up in front of the building, the patrolmen's voices raised in excitement. Under that was the slow beat of the killer's heart, his unhurried breath. There were voices coming from the neighboring apartments, but nothing which should concern them. So, what . . . ?

Heartbeats. In this room there should have been two mortal beats.

There was only one.

❑❑❑❑❑

One and two and three and four and five. Breathe! Breathe! One and two and three and four and five. Breathe! Breathe!

The City of Toronto Police Department required that all of its officers be proficient in first-aid procedures, something that Janette had found more than mildly amusing.

"Really, Nicolas. Protect these mortals if you must, but why go to such efforts to save those already dying? What are you saving them for? Another three years? Another twenty? In no time at all they will be dust no matter what you do." She had flicked lightly at the book he had been attempting to study. "You will do nothing more than stain your clothing over mortals who probably deserve exactly what they have gotten."

"No, I can't believe that. All human life is precious, Janette. Why can't you understand that?" It was an old argument between them, off and on for the last hundred years or more. Janette had just shook her head sadly at poor, deluded Nicolas, and drained her wine glass. After a moment the conversation had turned to neutral subjects and the subject was dropped. Nick's study, however, was not.

Thank God.

One and two and three and four and five. Breathe! Breathe!

Nick continued CPR on Tracy's still form as the rescue personnel arrived. Within seconds the men were set up and quickly relieved him. Nick stood up and backed away, watching uncertainly.

"Is she . . . ?" he began hesitantly. One of the men looked up and shook his head.

"Don't know yet. We're taking her to St. Thomas's. The doctors will be able to give you more." He then turned back to his partner as a piece of their equipment began to emit a high-pitched tone.

"Ready? Clear!"

As Tracy's small body arched lifelessly into the air, Nick knew he had to do something. Anything. Schanke's death was still fresh in his mind, the pain of the senseless murder, the crazed killer.

It wouldn't happen again. In seconds Nick was out the door, barely keeping his feet to the floor as he hurried toward the stairwell. The killer had been injured, and couldn't have gotten far. Bleeding as heavily as he was, there was a good chance that Nick would be able to pick up the still-fresh blood smell.

The fire door to the stairs on Tracy's floor had a fresh smear of blood. Nick launched himself down the cement stairs, not bothering with the mundanity of steps. The stairs ended in the underground parking area. At the stairway exit Nick stopped to listen and smell.

A quick, wheezing intake of breath. The smell of mortal sweat. And blood.

Heedless of appearances, Nick moved with vampire speed toward the scent of fresh blood. The man might have been lucky before, but now Nick was ready for him. The man was meat.

A tall figure leaned awkwardly against the wall of the night watchman's office, the smell of blood very strong. With a blur of speed Nick reached him, spun him around into the air.

"May I have this dance?" Nick grinned through vampire teeth. The man's head snapped back, revealing a stranger's face, the throat slit from ear to ear. Hot with fury, Nick tossed the body aside and turned toward a sound behind him.

Facing him was a smiling ghoul. Gore streaked down from one empty eye socket, splattering the white shirt and black trenchcoat beneath. The remaining eye gleamed madly above a rictus grin of pain and hate.

Simply killing this madman would not be enough. First he must be made to know a part of the pain he had inflicted upon others. Nick drew the man's eye toward his own, and launched himself brutally into the man's mind.

A cold, black iciness enveloped his soul. A force so powerful that to call it merely evil would be to minimize the horror it brought with it as it flooded into him. A thick, slow chuckle echoed through his head, a voice that sounded vaguely familiar. As something reached for him out of the darkness, Nick pulled himself free.

The man was still in his grasp, smiling slightly.

"What manner of man . . .?" Nick couldn't find the words. Never had he felt this kind of horror. Not in nearly eight hundred years. The man's smile widened as if in sympathy. And he brought a chunk of wood from Tracy's door down into Nick's chest. The power of the blow knocked Nick back into the wall of the small office, pinning him there like a bug. The man's smile never faltered.

"I was wrong about you. You are weak, just like those pathetic mortals. So many things will kill you. You flee from your Dark Lord, and it makes you weak. We will not meet again, coward." With that pronouncement he turned and fled up the driveway and into the breaking dawn.

Nick pulled weakly at the makeshift stake. It had gone completely through his chest and into the wall behind him. Blood coated the exposed length of wood, making it hard to grasp. A wracking cough shook him, splattering clots of blood in a wide half-circle in front of him. He pulled again at the stake, weaker this time. The garage had become painfully bright, with shining prisms reflecting off the hoods of the nearby cars. Blood welled up in his throat, and he tried to cough again. Nothing emerged but a strangled gasp, and the colored prisms started to spin as the first light of dawn began to fill the garage.

❑❑❑❑❑

LaCroix watched the first tinges of pink creep across the night skyline, lost in thought. Idly, he dipped one long finger in the blood he held and traced it around the rim of the fine Waterford crystal which held it. The clear tone blended nicely with the final strains of *A Little Night Music*, playing from hidden speakers behind him. As the silence grew, the first fingers of the angry sun crept above the horizon and he reluctantly pressed the button which would close his windows against the coming day. He should be preparing for his rest, but something tugged at the ancient vampire. Something strong enough to keep him from his sleep even here, in his most secure of places.

It most assuredly wasn't the mortal woman whom Nicolas was so concerned with. She had been interesting, even fascinating in her own limited fashion, but she was nothing that Nicolas could not deal on his own. Her cool, cynical composure would keep him from becoming emotionally attached, that much was certain: Nicolas had always preferred his ladies frail and delicate, almost angelic in word and deed. For a time LaCroix had entertained the thought that perhaps this was changing, but Nicolas had made it clear that his interest in the Lambert woman was purely one of *self*-interest. At the time LaCroix had been curiously disappointed in Nicolas' pragmatism in this manner; Natalie was an extraordinary woman, and would have made a beautiful, resourceful vampire. No matter. Nicolas would not be ruled by foolish mortal emotions in this.

Still, something about the Keller woman kept drawing him back to their meeting an hour before. Tall, with deep green eyes and dark hair cut short in the current fashion, she possessed a magnetism he did not often see among mortals. Perhaps it was her hunter's mind, which apparently questioned everything and took nothing at face value. More likely it was the small gift that she possessed for seeing beyond the physical plane. While no match for any vampire, she did possess certain mental gifts which no doubt made her a formidable enemy.

To mortals.

LaCroix shook his head, and refilled his wine glass one last time. It really was getting late. If this kept up, soon he would be emulating Nicolas and his foolish attempts at mortal behavior, staying up half the day to work on one idiotic mortal activity or another. LaCroix drained the glass quickly, savoring the warm, salty nectar as it slid down his throat. Why Nicolas would wish to give this up, this delicious combination of power, knowledge and sensuality was beyond his understanding.

Nicolas.

That was what kept him from his rest.

"Nicolas. What have you gotten yourself into, hmm?"

❑❑❑❑❑

"Nick?" Samantha tapped the blond man on the shoulder. Startled, the man turned his head around with a jerk, dropping the small plastic bag he'd been holding. He was much thinner, with a sickly-looking mustache dying on his face and an ME ID on his shirt.

"Huh?" Something must have shown on her face, because he drew back in alarm. "N-n-n-no. My name's Ralph. Can I, um, help you?"

"I'm looking for Detective Knight. About so high, blond? Wearing a long black coat?" Sam let out a short, exasperated breath as the man looked at her blankly.

"Ambulance guys said somebody was here before we arrived. Sounds like it might have been Knight." One of the patrolmen spoke up, looking at her uncertainly. "And you are . . . ?"

"Keller. RCMP. Did they say where he went?"

"Guy took off like a shot. Ambulance driver thinks he went left."

Sam nodded impatiently, not sure where this need to hurry, to act, was coming from. "How about Vetter? Any word?" she asked, already moving toward the door.

"Doesn't look good. Doc said he'd call the station as soon as they had anything," the patrolman said, his voice a mixture of concern and anger. One of their own had gone down. Even with only a year on the force, he shared every cop's unspoken request: Please, let me be the one to catch this bastard. Let me take him down. *Let me take him out.*

As he finished, Sam hit the hallway. The stairs were straight ahead, a small bloodstain near the door handle, and she shoved the door open, careful to not hit the blood with her gloved hand. *Don't mess up the evidence. We've never gotten a print on this guy. We're so close now. Don't screw it up. But hurry, hurry.*

At the bottom of the stairs she paused long enough to draw her gun, then carefully opened the last fire door. The quiet told her that the uniforms hadn't been down here yet—they must have beaten her to the scene by seconds. Good. Too many voices, too many men with minds jacked up over the

"officer down" call would distract her. Looking in both directions, she carefully edged out, her back flat against the wall of the stairwell. From outside she could here the police radios and voices raised in excitement or curiosity. From inside, only the soft hum of electric lights overhead.

Wait. There was something else. Something . . . dripping. Using the parked cars for cover, she moved cautiously in the direction of the faint sounds. *Bad guy still here? Don't think so. Doesn't feel right. But something's wrong. Watch yourself, kiddo.*

The underground parking garage seemed a lot larger than it should have been. Every sound was magnified, distorted. Common sense declared that she should go upstairs, get warm bodies to help in the search. But another, deeper, sense whispered otherwise, and that was the voice that Samantha had always followed. After what seemed to be an eternity, she approached the far wall of the garage. Two bodies were there, one sprawled on the cement floor in a puddle of blood, the other leaning awkwardly against the wall nearby. No bad guy in sight. Lowering her weapon slightly, Sam hurried forward.

Wait.

Slowing as she approached, Samantha tried to see what was wrong. The standing figure was in shadow, but she could see from the posture that whoever it was was either unconscious or dead. Whoever had done this had clearly left. So what . . . ?

Smoke. The body's smoking.

What she had first taken to be steam rising off a warm body in the early morning air was in fact white smoke, curling up in lazy circles from the body leaning against the wall. Now that she was closer, Sam could also see that the body was pinned to the wall, its head slumped forward onto a blood-soaked chest. Her gun up, she moved slowly forward.

Incredibly, as she stopped in front of the body it twitched slightly, and a thick, low moan rose from the flailed chest.

"Easy, buddy. The ambulance is on its way. Just take it easy." With that she reached forward with her free hand and lifted the chin. Who was the poor bas—

"Hell-fahr." The sounds of a long-ago childhood in New Orleans escaped as she stepped awkwardly backward, gun trembling in front of her. "Nick? Is that you?"

Nick Knight responded painfully to the presence in front of him. Someone was there, standing in the fire of sunlight that surrounded him, smothered him. *Please, let them understand, let them—*

"—help . . . help me," the blood-soaked apparition in front of her whispered weakly. Nick's voice, his presence, coming from this . . . thing.

This vampire.

"Well, doesn't that just explain a lot." Reluctantly, Samantha lowered her weapon. Her first startling impression of Nick flooded back from the night they'd met. The feeling of an ancient spirit, a powerful amorality kept at bay by the strength of will alone. She had checked him out, already knowing that he wasn't the killer she sought. But he clearly was *a* killer. Could she help him? *Should* she?

He had come here after Tracy's attacker. He was a cop.

He's a vampire, for God's sake!

She watched as he pulled weakly at the improvised stake that held him to the wall. Smoke slowly drifted from his exposed skin. Exhausted, he slumped forward, his face a mask of agony.

"Oh, what the hell. Not like I expected to die in bed, or anything. C'mon, Nick. Nick? Can you hear me?" She shook his shoulder gently, mindful of the deep wounds just below. Slowly, he lifted his head, blinked at her unseeingly.

"Nick, I'm gonna help you now, okay? Probably gonna hurt like hell, but then it'll get better. Okay?" She looked at him doubtfully. He seemed to have lapsed back into unconsciousness. Putting one of his arms over her shoulder, Samantha leaned forward and put on leg on the wall next to him. Shoving hard, she pulled him and the stake free of the wall, the force of it staggering both of them backward. Careful to avoid moving the stake and doing further damage, she dragged Nick's apparently unconscious body deeper into the garage, away from the dawn's first light.

"Great. Now what? I'm assuming that a hospital is out of the question," she added to his still form. She sat on her haunches next to him, biting her lip. It was only luck that had kept the patrolmen out of the garage so far. Sooner or later they'd come down, and even old Uncle Remy, that master of the tall tale, wouldn't be able to get them out of *that.*

"Okay. You sit tight, Nick. I'll be right back."

❑❑❑❑❑

Natalie Lambert paced back and forth in her small office, her lab coat flapping about her knees. "What do you mean, you can't find him? His partner's just been attacked. Of course I tried him at home! Yes, I'll try again." Untangling herself from the phone's long cord, Natalie slammed down the receiver with a frustrated *bang!* Captain Reese had passed on the news of Tracy's attack, knowing that she and Nick were friends. The attack had been a terrible shock, but not nearly as bad as when he had not *quite* casually asked her if she'd heard from Nick in the past hour. It was now fully day, and while Nick's car had been found at the scene of Tracy's attack, he himself was nowhere to be found. When he didn't answer the phone at home, Natalie began frantically calling every place that he might have gone to "hole up" against the oncoming day.

Nothing. No Nick, no message, no badly burned body with police identification. "Damn it! Why does he always do this?" Natalie slammed one fist against her leg, her face crumpling in fear and frustration. *Why does he always do this to me?* Natalie told herself that Nick would show up like he always did, no worse for wear, a perplexed smile on his face when he saw her worried expression. After all, he'd been taking care of himself for nearly eight hundred years without her. He was probably just fine.

"Damn it," she said quietly, her arms hugging her shoulders tightly. "Nick, where are you?" She allowed herself one moment of self-indulgent pain and worry, then got back to work. Where would Nick have gone, if he was caught out?

"His car. Of course," she said, smiling slightly in relief, then called, "Martin?"

The day ME, a portly, graying gentleman with a penchant for terrible cigars, stuck his head into her office.

"Can you cover for me?"

"Certainly, my dear." He tipped an imaginary hat in her direction, then stopped as he saw the expression on her face. "Anything amiss?"

Natalie forced her face into a casual smile.

"No, just remembered something that I need to get done. You're sure you don't mind?"

"Not at all. Just don't forget that you owe me one when Julia comes by." Julia was his granddaughter, legendary in the department for her ability to sell Girl Guide cookies.

"I'll buy a case. Thanks, Martin." Already shucking off her lab coat, Natalie grabbed her keys and headed for the door.

❑❑❑❑❑

"Nick? Can you hear me?"

Samantha waved her hand over Nick's open eyes, but received no response. Nick remained unmoving—and apparently unbreathing—as he had since she'd manhandled him out of her car and into her hotel room an hour ago. Presumably his house or apartment would be better suited for him, but Nick had been in no condition to offer directions, and her knowledge of downtown Toronto was spotty at best.

"Ah—*I*," she corrected herself, "have a vampire in my hotel room. A vampire," she repeated. "I've seen some very strange things in my time, Nick, but I don't mind telling you that this beats all. I wish to hell you'd wake up and tell me what to do."

For it was obvious that something was very wrong. He'd stopped smoking—burning, her mind firmly corrected—as soon as she had him out of the direct sunlight, but the terrible wound in his chest continued to bleed. She'd been hopeful when the wound around the main point of entry had begun to close as soon as she removed the stake, but it never closed completely, and other, smaller wounds continued to bleed. Samantha wasn't sure, but she thought these areas might be where splinters were still embedded, so deeply that she couldn't see them. In addition, his face had taken a gray, emaciated look that she didn't like. His fangs were still very noticeable, as were his strange eyes. Nick clearly needed help.

For want of anything else to do, she checked the makeshift bandages she'd made from the bed sheets and assorted hotel towels. The bleeding had slowed but the wounds hadn't closed any further. Soon she'd need more towels. It was a good thing that the hotel put plastic slipcovers on their mattresses. Reaching up to thoughtfully scratch her nose, Samantha saw that her fingers were covered with blood. Wrinkling her nose, she pushed up off the bed and headed toward the bathroom.

The bright red fluid turned pink as it swirled down the drain. Reaching for a clean towel, Samantha caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror over the sink. She looked more than a little like a staking victim herself, her blouse and jacket coated with rust-colored stains which were slowly drying.

"Guess this jacket's a wash. Wonder if I can put it on my expense rep—" she stopped in mid-sentence.

Oh, you dummy. Bloodstains. Blood.

Nick was a vampire. Even if all of the legends weren't true, one almost certainly was: he drank blood. Those long fangs couldn't be for anything else. And, judging from the sheets and from what she was currently wearing, he'd lost a lot of it.

Great. I doubt sincerely that the blood bank does take-out.

She forced herself to finish cleaning up as best she could to give herself time to think. Even if she could make a hospital understand what he needed, Nick would end up in a scientific sideshow somewhere.

No way. No how.

That left meat markets, few of which were likely to be open at this hour. Still, that might be her best bet. There was a phone book by the bed. Drying her face, Samantha returned to the main room. Pulling out the phone book, she glanced idly at Nick as she thumbed through it. He looked worse, if that was possible, and when she touched him his skin was ice-cold.

"Damn." She hesitated a moment longer, then reached to pull a switchblade out of her right boot. A long, sharp blade popped out when she pushed the recessed button, and she laid its sharp edge along the inside of her left hand, pulling back quickly to leave a long, deep cut across the palm. She hissed involuntarily as the initial sting became pain, but held the hand steady as blood began to well up in her cupped palm. Was it her imagination, or did Nick stir ever so slightly? Setting the switchblade on the dresser where she could reach it easily, Samantha lowered her hand slowly toward Nick's mouth.

The moment the first drops of blood hit his lips Nick blinked, and raised a weak hand to hers as it met his lips. She was surprised to feel no pain, just a curious draining sensation as though more than just a few cups of blood were being taken from her. After what seemed to be just a few seconds, Nick's eyes blinked again, and some sort of comprehension filled his face. Weakly he pushed at her hand while he turned his head away from her.

"No. You don't understand . . ." His voice was weak, but clear.

"I understand, all right. C'mon, Nick, it's okay."

"No." His voice seemed weaker. "You don't understand. I could kill you." He appeared to be about to add something, then stopped.

"Nick?" At his lack of response, she continued uncertainly, "Let me help you. Come on. Talk to me." Her hand was still bleeding freely, and she absently wrapped it in her handkerchief. "There must be something I can do. C'mon, Nick, don't give up on me now."

He whispered something softly. She leaned over him, her ear near his blood-stained lips. "Who?"

"Nat," he managed weakly.

❑❑❑❑❑

Nick's Cadillac was where the captain had said it would be, parked at a crazy angle outside of Tracy's apartment building. Parking control had ordered it towed, and Nat had to chase off the tow-truck driver, who gave her a look that suggested that maybe *she* needed hospitalization. Nat waited impatiently until he'd driven off, then lightly tapped the Caddie's trunk lid.

"Nick?" She felt like an idiot talking to a car, but it would be worth it if he would only answer. "Nick? Are you in there?" There was no reply, and the lid had a hollow sound when she hit it that suggested it was empty. Discouraged, she turned and sat on the trunk lid, trying to think of where to look next. The idea that maybe Tracy's attacker had managed to capture—or kill—Nick kept coming back to her, no matter how hard she tried to banish it. Keeping moving seemed to be the only thing that did the trick. Moving around to the front of the car, Natalie reached in and felt around under the seat. Sure enough, the extra set of keys that Nick had were still there. She'd just take the Caddie back to Nick's place, where he could pick it up when he came home.

If he comes home, her mind whispered. *What if he doesn't, Natalie? What will you do then?* Natalie was saved from having to answer by the sudden beeping of her pager. The number wasn't one she recognized.

❑❑❑❑❑

"Come on, come on. Ring, darn it." Sam paced the narrow confines of her hotel room, willing the telephone to ring. It had taken her several minutes to track down Natalie Lambert, or at least her pager number. Nick had been able to add nothing more to his cryptic comment about "Nat" or "a nat", and she was rapidly running out of choices.

Natalie Lambert had talked with Knight extensively on the night of the murder at The Raven, and from their body language Sam made the assumption that they were more than just co-workers. The woman was also a physician, and could very well go by the nickname of Nat. It was slim, but it was all she had.

And now that she'd placed the call, Samantha was afraid to leave, afraid to tie up the phone line looking for a meat market which opened early. Nick moved from time to time, but never seemed to again reach consciousness. His pain and confusion made her head ache as well, adding to the migraine she'd felt building since she'd last slept some two days ago. She'd gulped cup after cup of the hotel's complementary coffee, but at this point it was up in the air as to whether the caffeine helped or hurt matters. She looked back at the phone in disgust.

"Ring. Come on, Doctor. Talk to me."

RING RING. RING RING.

When the phone actually did ring, she nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Hello? Doctor Lambert, my name is Samantha Keller, with the RCMP. You may remember me, I'm working the Correlli killing? Yes, that's right. I'm sorry to contact you off duty, but . . . Yes, I understand that you're busy, this won't take a moment." After all of these years, those lessons in phone courtesy still stick. *My, momma must be proud. Get on with it.* "Doctor Lambert, I'm calling about one of the detectives in Homicide, Detective Knight. I understand you know him fairly well. Are you familiar with his . . ." *What? Unusual dental records? Nocturnal habits? Propensity for long black capes and silly accents?* ". . . blood condition? You are? Great. Could I ask you to come see me? Yes, it's regarding Nick. He ran into a little trouble over at Vetter's apartment, and—

"Good. I'm staying at the Toronto Hilton, room 505. Thank you, Doctor."

Samantha set the phone down and let out a sigh of relief. Lambert seemed to be aware of what was going on. In fact, from the tension in her voice, Sam thought that Nick and the good lady coroner were more than just friends. In any case, Lambert was on her way over.

Killers who mesmerize their victims before carrying them through skylights unassisted, bar owners who are curiously magnetic in a murderous sort of way, and now vampire detectives. All in all it had been a long, strange couple of days. Exhausted, she sat down in the chair nearest the door and closed her eyes.

❑❑❑❑❑

Doctor Lambert had been reassuringly brisk and efficient. Armed with pints of blood and enough surgical equipment to impress Hawkeye Pierce, she had quickly gotten Nick out of danger. Samantha had watched in detached fascination as Lambert deftly pulled long splinters out of his chest, which immediately began to heal over. Amazing what half a dozen pints of blood could do for a person. Vampire.

Samantha closed her eyes for just a moment, and when she opened them again Dr. Lambert was doing something rude to her hand.

"Ow!"

"Sorry. Hold still, just another minute . . . Okay, that's it." Natalie tied off the stitch in Samantha's left hand, then began wrapping it in layers of gauze. "Mind telling me how this happened?" Her voice had the same tone doctors voices always did when you'd done something stupid. Sam pulled her hand free as soon as the bandages were tied and flexed it experimentally. At her wince, Natalie shook her head.

"It's going to be sore for quite a while. You were lucky, though, and missed the tendons. Once it's healed over, do some stretching exercises and it should be fine."

"Thanks. Is he going to be okay?" She pointed with her chin to the bed, where Nick appeared to be sleeping peacefully.

"A good day's sleep and he'll be fine. You know, I'd really like to know how you got involved in all of this. You seem to be taking all of this in stride, but I can't believe that this hasn't . . . widened your perspectives a little bit. Want to talk about it?"

Samantha shook her head wearily.

"Some other time. Can you stay with him, make sure he's going to be all right? I need to check on a few things, and I can't do it from here."

"Sure, but I think what you need is some sleep. And food. When was the last time you had either, Agent Keller?" Nat's voice was firm, but gentle. It had worked on Nick more than once, and seemed to be having the same affect on his strange savior. Samantha yawned mightily.

"Food sounds good." She looked down at her ruined clothes with distaste. "And maybe a shower. Okay. I'll go grab a quick shower, then we can order up some breakfast. In the

meantime, leave the door locked, don't answer it, and don't answer the phone." At Nat's raised eyebrows, she added, "I don't think our bad guy will come after him right now, but it pays to be cautious. Do you know how to shoot a gun?" At Nat's reluctant nod, she said, "Good. I'll leave mine out here with you. Anyone tries to come in, don't get fancy, go for the body shot," she concluded with a yawn.

"Okay, okay, go already." Nat waved her toward the bathroom, and Samantha willingly obeyed.

❑❑❑❑❑

The setting of the sun awoke Nick from a deep, dreamless sleep. To a vampire, the vanishing of the sun was like a call to action, or to freedom, and awakening from the day's slumber came with the sharp immediacy of diving into a mountain stream. He opened his eyes and sat up.

The slight twinge in his chest brought the memories of the night before flooding back, causing him to rub his chest in uneasy recollection. It had been many years since he had been so helpless, so very near death. A soft sigh from nearby brought him back from his painful memories. He was in a hotel room, with Nat asleep beside him on the wide bed. An unwilling smile crept to his lips, but the thought of teasing his good friend died when he saw her face.

Even in sleep, Natalie's face looked drawn with fear and worry. Dark shadows had formed under her eyes, and she slept on top of the covers in clothes that were spattered with his blood. She had probably stayed awake the entire day, watching over him as he slept, after working her normal shift the previous night. Gently, he reached out and brushed a lock of brown hair from her eyes. At this, her eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Nick?" Her hushed voice was filled with surprise and a deep relief which she couldn't hide as she struggled to sit up and patted futilely at her hair. Nick had time to feel a pang of guilt for her needless concern before her face cleared and she raised a sardonic eyebrow.

"Boy, I wish my beauty sleep worked as well as yours does. How are you feeling?" Her voice, still hushed in a "people are sleeping" manner, made him belatedly aware that there was someone else in the room. The darkened room was no problem for his vampire eyes, now that he knew to look.

"I've had a lot of practice," he replied absently. "Is that Keller?"

Natalie started to nod in reply, and saw that Nick was already rising, his head turned toward the sleeping officer. "Yeah. She brought you here after your little run-in with Tracy's attacker."

Nick's face darkened, and he paused to turn and look in Natalie's direction.

"How is she?"

"Tracy's still up in ICU, but it looks like she's going to make it."

Natalie had risen from the bed as well, and was struggling to get her sleep-rumpled clothing in order. "Look, why don't we go into the bathroom for a minute. The light's better in there, and I'd like to take another look at your chest. Your wounds, I mean. You look a lot better, but I'm still not sure that I got all of the splinters out." She headed toward the bathroom without a backward glance.

When Nick arrived a moment later, Natalie was energetically splashing water on her face. Finished, she reached out blindly for the towel, which had fallen to the floor. Instead, her hand brushed against Nick. Her eyes flew open in surprise at the instant of contact with his bare arm, and she blinked rapidly at the water which dribbled into her eyes.

"God, you scared me! Do me a favor and make some noise when you walk into a room, would you?" Wordlessly she accepted the towel he proffered, and patted quickly at her face. "I'm sure that we can take these bandages off now. I'll go get my scissors, and—"

"Nat," Nick said gently. "Hang on a second." He reached out and lightly took her hand as she started to walk around him. "Last night must have been really tough for you." Natalie started to wave him off, but he continued, "I might not always say it, but I really appreciate what you do for me. You're always there when I need you, and I can't ever repay you for that. You're really something special, Natalie." With his free hand he reached out and lightly touched her cheek. "You know that, don't you?" They had drawn closer together as he spoke, and now looked uncertainly at each other from inches apart.

"Nick, you know that I—" Natalie broke off as she saw an image appear over Nick's shoulder in the bathroom mirror.

"Sorry. Am I interrupting something?" Samantha looked as rumpled at Natalie had, but her green eyes sparkled with amusement. "I really hate to break this up, but *somebody* let me oversleep—" She shot an annoyed look at Natalie "—and we've got a bad guy to catch. Mind if I use the shower?" She nodded at Nick nonchalantly, and slipped by them to turn the shower on. Nick and Natalie looked at each other wordlessly, then surrendered the bathroom to their peculiar associate.

❑❑❑❑❑

Azoth had displeased his Dark Lord.

That was the only explanation for the terrible turn of events the night before. Until then Azoth had been strong in his faith, sure that nothing could stop him from offering sacrifices to his god. Even the police woman who had dogged his steps for the last month had been no more than an inconvenience. She was canny and quick, but he had gifts far beyond anything she could hope to experience. And when he had stumbled upon the nightclub, he thought it was his Lord's will—here were many who would understand, who would help him in his unholy mission.

But it was not meant to be.

They had not understood. Worse, they had sent one of their own—puny, weak, but still one of them—to punish him for his transgressions. He had been forced to kill the pitiful creature quickly, with none of the ceremony required by his Lord. Even the man's pet had resisted him, turning her mind away from him long enough to inflict wounds which throbbed and pulsed with his every heartbeat even now. His face was swollen, the area around his left eye socket inflamed and red.

Another sacrifice was necessary. It would be more

difficult to approach his victim now, with his face marred, but the difficulty would be part of his penance for failing with the blonde woman. He would find another, and make the proper appeasements before leaving this cursed city. Perhaps more than one, to show that he was not fleeing like a dog with its tail between its legs. An entire family, perhaps . . .

Humming happily to himself, he began to plan.

❑❑❑❑❑

Nick Knight was not a happy man.

His conversation with Natalie while Keller was in the shower had confirmed his fears: Samantha knew everything. While Samantha had assured them both that she had no intention of revealing his secret—saying that people thought she was crazy enough as it is, and that ". . . there ain't no such animal as a Canadian X-Files, so who the heck would I tell, anyway?"—Nick wasn't quite so sure. She'd been hiding something, that much he was certain of. It hadn't helped matters that she asked remarkably few questions—far fewer than Nat had, years ago—and then said that she had an "errand" to run before they got to work.

In addition, his rookie partner had been badly injured, and might not even survive. The doctors said that they were hopeful, but seeing Tracy in the ICU unit, her face pale and drawn, had not convinced him. It was always hard for him to accept that those he cared about would eventually age and die, but in cases like this it was even harder. Tracy was young and energetic, just getting started in her life. Now she was just another victim, with friends and family waiting nearby to see if she would live or die.

Vachon had been at the hospital, to Nick's surprise. Whether or not there was a relationship blooming between them Nick still didn't know, and from the look on Vachon's face, neither did he. Still, the younger vampire had agreed to stay at the hospital for the evening, in case the killer made another attempt at Tracy. Two uniformed police officers would also stand guard, but after the night before, Nick doubted that they would be very effective if the killer did indeed decide to pay Tracy a call. Pulling out of the hospital parking lot, Nick told himself that Tracy would be safe here. He didn't entirely believe it, but he knew that he would need every bit of his attention tonight if he was to find her attacker before the man killed again.

❑❑❑❑❑

Samantha was waiting for him outside of The Raven, as she'd promised. The club had reopened that night, and from the look of things, business was booming. Ducking through the crowd, he joined her as she turned and walked toward the alley adjoining the club.

"Get your errands taken care of?" he asked lightly.

"Yep. You wouldn't believe the story I had to tell the cleaners." She was still dressed as she had been earlier in the evening, well-worn blue jeans and a plain white shirt under her bulky down jacket.

When she didn't elaborate further, he added, "I checked on Tracy. Doctors say she's probably going to be okay. Metro put two patrolmen down there just in case."

"Mmm." Samantha pulled off her gloves, and traced the gray stone rear wall of the club. "He's not going after her. Too many people, too many lights," she replied absently.

"Is that an RCMP projection, or . . . something else? Something . . . personal?" At Samantha's sharp, guarded glance he continued, "I've seen people with gifts like yours before. Want to tell me about it?"

She snorted in disgust. "Gift? I'd have argued that with you when I was thirteen. I nearly ended up in a damn funny farm. I—someone's coming."

Nick was already turning as LaCroix appeared in the mouth of the alley, his long form clothed in black and dramatically backlit by the street lamps.

"You make such wonderful entrances," Samantha marveled. "Afraid we're going to scare away the clientele?" Her voice was light, but her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Or is there something out here we're not supposed to see?"

LaCroix smiled thinly. "Still haven't solved your . . . problem, Nicolas? How unfortunate. Tick tock, tick tock." He shook his head in mock sorrow. Nick risked a glance at Samantha, but she had wandered away, one hand still tracing the stone wall. Nick hurried after her with LaCroix trailing slowly behind.

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Samantha's face had a remote quality to it that Nick was beginning to recognize. She walked slowly along the wall, intent on something that he could not see. After a moment she paused and knelt to lightly touch the half-melted snow beneath their feet.

"It was cold, and barely sun-up. People were coming and going, but no one saw him come down the fire escape. He must have been covered in blood, but no one saw him. He's always so careful not to be seen. Somehow he's planning these ahead of time and we just haven't found the pattern. He knew to come here, and he knew how to get away. He knew . . ." She faded off uncertainly.

"An accomplice?" Nick added softly. "Someone to pick him up afterward?"

She shook her head. "No. He's alone. He's always alone." She shivered, and her face narrowed, her mouth tightening into a snarl. "*He/I come and go as I/he chooses. The pathways are cool, comforting. Very dark and dank. So very much like . . .*

"Home?" Keller's voice returned to its own pitch, and she blinked in surprise. She was standing in front of a large wooden crate which was stained and warped with age. Behind her she could faintly hear the two men who had followed her down the alleyway. Fragments of memory—someone's memory—came back to her: the sound of heavy boxes—*wooden* boxes—being shifted. The slide of metal on metal, the smell of fetid air.

"Here." She shoved experimentally at the crate, which refused to budge. Gritting her teeth, she set her feet and shoved again. Nothing. "Gentlemen, would one—" She stopped as a pair of black-gloved hands shoved the crates back easily.

LaCroix was next to her, looking at her with an expression on his face that she couldn't read. Looking down, she saw that where the crate had covered the cement, there was a heavy, metallic manhole cover.

"Bingo," she breathed softly.

Nick shook his head. "We checked the sewer system. There wasn't any sign that he went that way." He looked over her shoulder skeptically.

"The main sewer system, sure. But take a look at this." She knelt and rubbed lightly at the grime covering the manhole's lettering.

"'Property of Toronto City Department of Transportation'," Nick read. "It must have been part of the subway system they were talking about putting in a few years ago. But how did *he* know about it?"

"Don't know," Samantha replied. Replacing her heavy gloves, she then slid her fingers into the holes in the lid and with a small grunt of effort slid the heavy cover out of the way. Rubbing her nose with the back of one hand, she offered them a slow smile which never quite reached her eyes.

"Let's ask him."

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The manhole had led down into a service walkway which had clearly not been serviced in a long while. The cheap cement which had been used in its construction had begun to seep with moisture from the "temporary" drainage system, and bits of the walls and ceiling had crumbled to the floor where it crunched under their feet. Aside from the light from Samantha's flashlight it was pitch black, and every metallic surface was covered with a thin layer of slime. LaCroix wiped one glove clean with distaste after inadvertently brushing against an exposed support beam.

"Charming. You are quite sure your killer came this way? This is certainly not the most practical method of travel he could have chosen. Or perhaps this just suits your sense of the dramatic?"

Samantha grinned. Her shot at "dramatic entrances" must have hit close to the mark. "He came through here. There were fresh scratch marks on the manhole cover and—" She bent down "—this looks like a bead from the Correlli woman's necklace." Pulling out an evidence bag she deposited the small faux pearl in it, then absently tucked it away again.

"LaCroix, you don't have to do this. This is our responsibility now." Nick kept his voice neutral with effort. He knew from long experience that to show a strong desire for his master to act in a certain way was to invite the opposite.

LaCroix was not fooled.

"Nonsense. I have an interest in this matter, as you well know, Nicolas. And, as a good police officer, you shall be obliged to arrest this man. After which, of course, he will doubtless plead insanity and provide the police with the most *amazing* of stories to prove this. Stories which would be best left untold," he concluded meaningfully, flicking his glance to Keller. She responded by raising one eyebrow expressionlessly.

"I expect that our suspect is going to resist arrest. Strenuously. Are you going to have a problem with that, Nick?" she said calmly.

"No," Nick replied. Truthfully, he felt the same way. The killer knew far too much, and was dangerously insane. More importantly, the man had hurt Nick and someone close to him, and the vampire within him clamored for revenge.

But it wasn't just the killer that LaCroix was referring to. Whether she knew it or not, Samantha was in deadly danger. LaCroix meant to see that the Code was obeyed, and had no compunctions about killing to do so.

❑❑❑❑❑

Azoth was mighty once again.

His god had accepted his sacrifice of the woman and her husband, and now he felt the power flow through him once again. The man had proven especially satisfying after Azoth had allowed the man to watch while Azoth dealt with the man's wife. Rage was good, but despair and grief, when combined with pain in the proper proportion, was the sweetest elixir Azoth had ever known. The female child he had dealt with almost as an afterthought, her young mind shattered by the sights she had seen. Still, even that had its uses . . .

Standing back to survey his work, Azoth breathed in the heady scent of blood and pain that he had created in his Lord's name. His own pain was gone, the missing eye no more than an inconvenience soon remedied. Bending down, he removed one eye from the woman's staring face. Curiously, she reminded him of someone. Someone from long ago.

Mother?

A woman's face looming over him, twisted with hate.

"Look what you've done! You're a nasty, filthy little boy! I ought to cut your eyes out!"

"I'm sorry, mommy. Please don't, please don't . . . "

No. Azoth was strong. Had always been strong. This was some weak, puling thing. Not Azoth. He examined the eye carefully, but saw only his own reflection on its dull surface. After a moment's consideration, he placed it in his own empty socket. The pain was bad, but faded almost immediately. As it did so, his Dark Lord whispered a warning in reward.

Someone's coming.

Lifting his head, he sniffed the air and listened.

The woman was coming. And two others. They meant to stop him. Chase him from their territory.

So soon. He did not wish the men harm, even the one whose pet he had toyed with. The man had survived, which told Azoth that he too served their Dark Lord. Perhaps they were his master's warning that he had stayed too long in this city. A thank you was in order, then, and a small whimpering from the corner told him how it might be done.

❑❑❑❑❑

It was cold in the tunnels, but only Samantha suffered from the chill. Rubbing her gloved hands together, she fought to keep her concentration on the matter at hand. They had been walking in these dark corridors for over an hour, wandering almost aimlessly through the maze of incomplete service

walkways. More than once they had been forced to turn back when the tunnel abruptly dead-ended in a blank wall or crumbled masonry. Try as she might, the feel of the killer's mind eluded her.

Instead, her mind kept returning to the two men who followed almost silently behind her. Knight was a blend of anger and concern, a darkness overlaid by adopted compassion. He would back her play against the monster they chased, but his own fears blurred his reactions. Whether or not it would make a difference in how their pursuit ended she didn't know.

LaCroix was a different story. On the surface he was tightly controlled, a master of himself and others. Beneath it, however, she caught occasional flashes of pleasure in the hunt, and of . . . curiosity? for herself. Not quite admiration—unless perhaps it was the admiration for a well-trained bloodhound—but for the moment she had caught his interest. Whether it would be enough to keep him from trying to kill her when this was over was unclear.

Mentally she shook herself. The killer would almost certainly strike tonight, and then he would be gone again. Musings about handsome, dangerous vampires would have to wait.

Someone's coming.

She stopped in her tracks, forcing the men to do the same in the narrow corridor. "Did you hear something?"

"Nothing," LaCroix replied, his voice a study in boredom. "And I can assure you that I would hear someone approaching long before you would, Agent Keller. One of the side effects of our . . . condition. The only mortal heartbeat that I can hear—" He leaned forward to whisper in her ear "—is yours."

"Wait," Nick said softly. LaCroix looked irritably over at his long-ago fledgling. Nicolas had no sense of humor.

But Nicolas wasn't looking at them. Instead, he sniffed delicately at the damp air.

"What?"

"Blood. Up ahead. Not far, I think." As he drew his gun, he turned slightly away from Samantha until the vampire was hidden within him once more. LaCroix sniffed, then nodded.

"And fresh, too. It would appear that we are too late."

❑❑❑❑❑

They had traced the smell of blood down the corridor and up a slime-covered ladder into what had apparently been intended as an office during the subway construction. Faded maps and schematics still lined the walls, but now they were covered in blood. More blood dripped from the ceiling, and from the large metal table which dominated the room. On it lay the remains of a white male, age indeterminate. Sprawled in a metal chair next to him was a white female, both horribly disfigured. Smoke and the smell of burnt flesh lingered in the room, emanating from a pile of half-burned skin and tissue resting in the center of a pentagram drawn in blood.

Pulling her eyes from the gruesome remains, Samantha scanned the room, already knowing that their prey was gone. Again and again as she tried to analyze the room for clues, her eyes were drawn back to the sad, horrible shapes that the killer had left behind. Even her vampire companions seemed momentarily taken aback at the brutality of the murders. In silence they walked around the small room, taking in the filthy cot, the collection of newspaper clippings which he had taped to one wall. Another ladder was attached to the far wall, and led up to a hatchway in the ceiling.

Nick reached for his radio, and Samantha put a hand on his arm.

"Let's wait a minute, okay?" Without saying any more she turned and walked resolutely toward the makeshift bed the killer had left behind. Taking a deep breath, she sat down and removed her gloves, kneading the blanket's rough material.

"Talk to me." Closing her eyes, she shut out the horror of the room, the danger of the men she was with. Only her prey mattered. He had been here, slept here. Planned here. He had thought about . . .

The way the blood shone in the moonlight, the sweet music of their cries. In exchange for his freedom in this bright, shining place, his Lord demanded sacrifice.

That was pointless. Psychotics always imagined that they were special, that their atrocities had a purpose. Try again.

He had not always been powerful. Images of a sacrifice, of a boon requested. A presence answering, darkness, DARKNESS! A black evil like nothing she had ever felt, swarming over her/his soul, engulfing her. From far away she heard voices calling her name, but the darkness was here, now. It was reaching for her . . .

No. For him. Resolutely, she pushed deeper. Abruptly, a voice spoke clearly in her head.

I've left you a present.

The words were followed in her head by a low, malignant laugh, and then she was back on the bed, with Nick shaking her shoulders.

"Samantha. Can you hear me?"

"There's something here. Someone." Forming the words with her mouth, pulling back out had never been so hard. Something whispered to her darkest thoughts, dragging her back down.

"Nonsense. There is no one else here." LaCroix's voice brought her back to reality with a jerk. He was standing above her, tension in his face. Apparently even LaCroix hadn't seen everything, yet.

"I'm okay, Nick. He knew we were coming. He left something for us, some kind of message, I think. It wasn't very clear . . ." Suddenly, her eyes happened on a small doll, half covered with blood and cast aside. "They had a daughter. She's still here. Somewhere." She looked around the small room in frustration. Where?

"I don't see where . . . wait." Nick got up and walked across the room, carefully avoiding the pools of blood that had formed. He stopped where a chair had been pushed against the wall, moved it aside. Behind it, partially obscured by the blood, was a narrow closet door. LaCroix and Samantha gathered behind him as he slowly opened the door.

Inside was a small blonde girl of about seven, her blue eyes staring in death at nothing. She had been stuffed casually inside the closet like a long-forgotten Raggedy Ann doll, her limbs in unnatural positions. Nick made a small sound of pity in his throat, and gently reached out to close the child's eyes.

At his touch she shuddered, her mouth working convulsively. He pulled back with a jerk and stumbled to his feet.

She blinked slowly, then smiled a terrible, gore-filled smile, tilting her head to one side in a grotesque parody of manners.

"I'm so sorry that I couldn't be here to welcome you to my home in person, but I'm sure that you can understand why I must be away." The voice, deep and mocking, that came from her mouth was that of the man who had nearly killed Nick the night before. "Perhaps we will meet again under more pleasant circumstances. In the meantime, might I extend to you gentlemen a peace offering? This vessel is, I'm quite sure, still warm, and deliciously innocent." He/she laughed unpleasantly. "But, I forget, you've brought your own." The child's smile widened, and she dropped one eyelid in a slow wink. "*Bon appetit.*"

With that the girl's eyes rolled up into her head, and she slumped bonelessly outward. Her head landed with a dull thud on the cement floor, the sound echoing loudly in the silent room.

For several moments there was no sound from within the small room save for the breath and heartbeat of its one mortal occupant. Finally, LaCroix pulled off one glove and knelt beside the child's body.

"She's been dead for some time." His pale fingers brushed lightly over her paler skin, feeling little warmth and no life there. Dead, the child had regained all of the innocence that she had lost mere moments ago, her face now a mask of sweet sadness.

"I've never seen anything like it," Nick said, his voice hushed. "LaCroix, you've seen—"

"Nothing like this. I've heard stories, of course." He started to elaborate, then uncharacteristically paused as Samantha stepped forward to stand beside them.

"I have." He voice was soft, and as she looked down at the dead child, her face was both remote and vulnerable. "Back in New Orleans. My partner and I were investigating a series of murders that had some kind of voodoo involvement. We didn't take it seriously. You know. Who believes in magic?" She smiled faintly. "Or vampires? Anyway, he went to talk to a witness, never came back. He was young, younger than me. My responsibility." She trailed off uncertainly, then risked at look at each of them to see if they understood. They did.

"I was a good tracker even then. Knew it, too. Didn't take me more than a few hours to find him. What was left of him. They'd . . . they'd cut him up pretty bad. He was just a kid, you know? I thought I was handling it pretty good right up until he opened his eyes. Told me that I'd let him die. Then he pulled one of the knives they'd used right out of his own body, and came after me. The look in his eyes, it was a lot like this little girl's." She laughed shortly.

"Later the Bureau couldn't understand why I'd put thirteen rounds into my partner's corpse. They put me on medical leave, and gave the case to someone else. Case wasn't ever solved. After a while I got tired of the way folks looked at me in the halls, and came up here." She smiled more fully this time, and turned to better face Nick.

"That's why you and yours don't shake me much, I expect. There's a lot of things in this world you can't pin down and dissect like a bug. Lot of strange, peculiar things." She stepped back so that she could see both men clearly. "Not that you two aren't at the top of the list."

LaCroix made an ironic half bow, and Nick managed a half smile.

"Now, are you two gonna fall on me, or are we gonna go catch that son of a bitch?"

❑❑❑❑❑

"Wait." LaCroix held up one hand and gestured his companions to silence. In the ensuing quiet he listened again for sounds which only his superior vampire senses could hear. Beyond the slow, steady beat of the Keller woman's heart and the soft scuffle of rats around them, something else tickled at his attention.

They had been traveling through these accursed tunnels for what seemed like hours. The sharp turns and narrow, damp walkways reminded him uncomfortably of the Paris sewers that he and his companions had been forced to hide in during the burning of Paris in 1870. At least *they* had not starved, unlike so many of the mortals above them . . .

"What is it?" Nicolas's voice was the barest of whispers.

"Just ahead. Can you not feel it, Nicolas? Have your senses become so dulled? *Listen.*"

Nick closed his eyes and stretched tentatively outward. At the edges of his awareness, something flickered. Something—*black, malignant*—familiar. He had been searching for a mortal, but what Nick sensed was something else entirely. More like the feel of another vampire. Powerful, dark. A malevolence that now turned briefly to him before continuing on.

"He knows we're here." Samantha's soft voice brought Nick back to his companions. LaCroix was nodding his agreement. Wordlessly they increased their pace.

Two sharp turns and the tunnel came to an abrupt end. A crumbling cement wall blocked their way, with a fragile ladder leading upward into the darkness. Nick pulled on the ladder to test its strength, then moved upward, quickly disappearing into the dark above. LaCroix and Samantha followed closely behind, each locked in their own thoughts.

❑❑❑❑❑

WHOOOONK!

The hot blast of air from the passing bus felt good on Samantha's face, even as the honk from the irate driver sent her pulse racing. The ladder had led them up to a manhole in the center of Fourteenth Street, which was busy even at this late hour. Traffic sped by on either side of them, with their prey nowhere in sight. Both men scanned the surrounding area, their eyes narrowing to see what was beyond mortal sight. Warm living bodies stood out against the cold background like torches, but the man they sought was nowhere to be found.

LaCroix turned and grabbed Keller by the shoulders.

"Where is he? Where has he gone now, Samantha?" His eyes blazed with a fierce eagerness which Nick had not seen in many years. After so many years, LaCroix had apparently

found a challenge worthy of his talents.

LaCroix belatedly remembered his own strength as Samantha flinched and pulled back. He released the mortal quickly, and she rubbed at her shoulders where he had gripped her.

"I don't know. He's . . . hiding from me somehow."

"We don't have much time," Nick cautioned. Behind them, the sky was tinged with the first light of false dawn.

"What do you want from me? It just isn't that easy." Samantha looked from side to side, searching for something, anything. "It's not like turnin' on a radio, or flippin' on the TV. I can't just say, 'Oh, yeah, he's that way. Gonna take a bus to Edmonton, check out the . . . mall'." She blinked in surprise.

"The bus station? He's taking a bus out of town?" Nick said, surprised. Behind him, LaCroix smiled thinly.

"It would appear that our signal has come in," LaCroix added dryly.

"Yeah, maybe so. Still, something's not right. He's got something up his sleeve, something . . . hidden." She shook her head. "If he knows we're coming, we could be walking into a trap." Another bus went by, and they were forced to wait until the noise died down before continuing.

"Nonetheless, it would appear to be our best shot."

"Maybe so, but how are we going to get there in time? I get the feeling that he's not going to wait all that long."

Nick grinned, and looked casually in both directions.

"We don't need *roads*."

"What are you talking about? We'll never get a 'copteeeeeer!" Samantha's jaw dropped in stunned surprise as Nick casually lifted both of them into the air and into the waning night.

❑❑❑❑❑

"There. The big guy with the dark jacket."

"Got him. LaCroix, you—" Nick bit off his instructions. LaCroix was nowhere in sight. "Okay, I'll go around to the other side. See if you can't get security to start clearing the area." He then stepped back outside and disappeared.

"Wonderful."

Samantha looked around the bus terminal in disgust. Despite the late hour better than a dozen people milled around, waiting for their buses to arrive. In addition, there were ticket sellers, drivers, janitors, and other staff to worry about. Nick had snuck off to take out her man, leaving her to cover his backside, and that of a handful of half-asleep civilians.

"I am *really* going to have a long talk with that boy. S'cuse me, sir, can I talk to you for a minute?" The portly security guard ambled obediently in her direction and she quickly began to explain the situation.

❑❑❑❑❑

The situation was looking up. Nick dropped lightly to the ground on the terminal's tarmac, out of sight of the passenger loading area. Their suspect had been heading out toward the bus waiting here, and grabbing him away from the other waiting passengers would keep innocent people from getting involved. *Or seeing something they shouldn't*, he mentally added.

Nick stepped around the corner of the terminal, then was forced to step back as a crowd disgorged from the idling bus and headed immediately toward the warm, brightly lit terminal. Sticking his head around the edge of the building, Nick saw the heavily bundled crowd part like water as they passed a tall, powerfully built man in a dark blue coat who stood like a rock in their river. The man waited patiently for them to pass, then deliberately looked in Nick's direction.

With a cool, mocking smile, the man opened his coat, revealing a small, clearly terrified young boy. The boy looked to be about seven, and his blond hair and blue eyes suggested a relationship to the girl they'd found earlier.

"Bastard," Nick whispered softly. Nodding as if he'd heard Nick, the man grabbed the boy by the arm, turned and walked back inside.

❑❑❑❑❑

LaCroix sighed with disappointment. Nicolas had had the correct idea in waiting until the man had separated himself from the other mortals before attempting to catch him. It would have been child's play to take the man from Nicolas and eliminate the problem. One of them, he amended. Once this unusual creature had been taken care of, there would still be the matter of the police officer. She was, he was quite sure, well aware of the danger that she is in. That she pursued her prey regardless suggested that she had some sort of plan with which to try to save herself. It was almost a pity that The Code required her death; it had been many years since he had been so entertained by a mere mortal.

❑❑❑❑❑

Azoth jerked the sacrifice back into the shelter of the swarm of little humans. The sacrifice whined softly in protest, but the injunction against speech which Azoth had imposed held. In any case, the boy's fear—which flowed from him in delicious waves—would have kept him too terrified to speak should that injunction waver. The weak beast and the other, much stronger one waited for them outside. The woman, though he could not feel her now, was undoubtedly nearby. He scanned the terminal, never loosening his grip on his next sacrifice. Azoth had half hoped to leave without confronting these pale hunters, but his Lord had seen fit to make it otherwise. His leaving of this place now would be drenched in blood, a glorious tribute to his Dark Lord.

❑❑❑❑❑

Samantha swore softly under her breath as the killer stepped back into the terminal, holding a small boy in front of himself like a shield. Passengers from the incoming bus now swarmed around the terminal, heading for the public phones or restrooms, or moving to stare out the front windows as they waited for their rides. Very few simply left the building, and it would be next to impossible to get them all out without

alerting their prey. *Well, if you can't move the mountain . . .* Grabbing a disreputable-looking scarf that was sticking out of a nearby garbage can, she pulled in down over her hair and slumped her shoulders. Carrying an empty shopping bag, Samantha shuffled slowly toward the killer, her right hand clutching the pistol inside her coat pocket.

❑❑❑❑❑

Gun out, Nick carefully approached the rear entrance to the bus terminal. Through the glass he could see better than two dozen people milling about, apparently looking for the now-nonexistent staff. In the middle of this confusion was their target, his back partially to Nick as the man looked slowly around the brightly lit terminal. It would be pathetically easy for the man to take an additional hostage, or even hold the entire terminal if he had a gun. Nick knew that he could take an ordinary mortal under circumstances like these. But this was no ordinary mortal, and to allow this many people to see the vampire . . . For a brief moment Nick wished that he'd followed procedure and called for backup, then grinned in spite of himself. The idea of explaining LaCroix, and Samantha's rather unique methods of tracking, were enough to make his head ache. They would just have to make do. Speaking of which, where was Keller?

❑❑❑❑❑

As Nicolas stepped quietly into the building, LaCroix gritted his teeth in annoyance. His perch on top of the terminal's roof was ideal for observing outside events, but somewhat lacking once the entertainment moved indoors. Knowing that Nicolas would certainly be needing his assistance, LaCroix dropped lightly over the side of the building.

❑❑❑❑❑

Samantha continued shuffling toward the killer, her face lowered beneath the ratty scarf to avoid any chance of his recognizing her. Flicking her eyes up briefly, she caught a glimpse of Nick as he slipped in through the back doors. Running one finger over the safety of her gun to make sure that it was off, she brushed past heavily burdened passengers and closed with her target.

❑❑❑❑❑

There she was. Nick straightened up from the water cooler and looked into the reflective surface of the terminal's big rear window. Beneath a ragged scarf and shuffling walk, Samantha was approaching the killer from his blind side. His back still to the two of them, Nick sidled closer.

❑❑❑❑❑

The weaker beast glowed with power, a power both familiar and at odds with Azoth's own. Azoth doubted that the man would provoke a rematch among all of these little mortals. Pity.

He'd have to do it himself.

The youngling sacrifice was becoming tiring. All that whimpering, the small heart beating a frantic, trapped rhythm. A pity there wasn't time for more elaborate ceremony, but one can always make up for a lack of quality with sufficient quantity. With a casual twist of his wrist, Azoth jerked the boy to him, then slashed his throat with one expert sweep of the blade he held in his left hand. Blood sprayed outward in a lovely fountain, quite red under the buzzing florescents. Azoth cast the boy aside, sending the child crashing into an old hag waiting at the ticket window. He didn't pause to enjoy the sight of his opening gambit, reaching instead for his second. A bag lady, one of the wretches of this earth, was conveniently near and he reached for her, intending to throw her at the approaching man. Azoth had a brief moment to realize that the hand holding the tattered shopping bag was smooth and clean before his hand made— *CONTACT!!*

Samantha's head reeled under the force of the black cloud which suddenly enveloped her. Images collided off each other and off her own rage and disgust at the animal in front of her. A dark, malignant Thing turned its head and fixed its interest on her. *NO!*

Azoth recoiled, slashing out blindly with his knife in an attempt to shut out the unwelcome images the witch had shown him. Still her hand cling to his, her green eyes too knowing. In revulsion he flung the woman from him, and the images mercifully ceased as something else snatched at him and sent him flying.

❑❑❑❑❑

Nick knew even as he launched himself at the killer that he was too late. Fresh blood smell filled the air, along with the first screams of terrified passengers. Moving faster than any human had a right to, he nonetheless reached the man only after the man had cast Samantha aside like a broken doll. Red fury filled him, and with a snarl he lifted the mortal in front of him and flicked him with one hand across the length of the terminal. More screams were added to the cacophony, but he paid them no heed as he turned to walk toward the twisted, bleeding body of the killer.

The other killer.

❑❑❑❑❑

Azoth pulled himself free of broken shards of bolted-down chairs and black-and-white televisions, struggling to his feet in disbelief. *Pain* filled his body, his powerful, immortal body. His right arm seemed useless, and his good eye blinked rapidly as hot, sticky blood trickled into it. For one horrible moment he even thought that the weak, puling sounds he heard were his own.

No, thank the Dark Lord. With his good arm Azoth lifted the old woman from the wreckage he had made and drew her in front of him. She squawked and struggled until he had her properly in place, then grew stiff and silent as she saw the man

approaching them.

❑❑❑❑❑

Nick walked slowly across the terminal, his footsteps echoing loudly in the sudden quiet. Some of the mortal passengers had regained enough sense to flee, but most had gone shocky-quiet, waiting to see which of them would be next.

Good. That would keep them out of his way.

The mortal animal in front of him snatched up a mortal shield, but Nick knew that it didn't matter. The man was injured, slow.

His.

"Let the woman go." Nick's voice was flat, and brooked no contradiction. His quarry smiled in response, but Nick could see that the smile was forced, and could hear the heart quicken beneath the man's flesh. Nick smiled in return, showing the only weapons that he would need.

"Not just yet." Despite his injuries, Azoth's voice was strong. "The lady and I haven't finished our dance." He leered, and reached forward to plant a bloody kiss on the woman's cheek. She flinched, and began to whisper fervently under her breath.

"I think you have." Nick began to walk forward again. "There's nowhere for you to run. Nowhere to hide." He stopped a few feet away, and fixed the mortal killer with the full force of his power.

"Let . . . the woman . . . *go*."

The shudder ran through the madman's body, and for a moment the blade at the woman's throat wavered. His face twitched convulsively, then forced itself into a sneer.

"That the best you've got, boy? I was centuries old when your master was born. Why not just give it up? Give up your pathetic posturings. Can't you feel her fear? We could *bathe* in it. Together." His last word came out as a whisper, and he pressed the blade firmly against the old woman's throat. A thin trickle of blood welled up and spilled down her throat and onto her high lace collar.

The blood smell and scent of fear heavy in the air brought old memories flooding back. Memories of the early days, before he tried to change—deny?—what he was. They had been powerful, then. Feared. Resolutely he pushed the memories away, but the feeling remained. Azoth smiled.

Nick turned his attention the man's mortal shield. In the old days, she would have been/was—

—Was a terrified human being, tears of fear spilling down wrinkled, dark brown cheeks. Her clothing was simple but elegant, now stained with both Azoth's blood and her own. Far to one side an older black man begged softly for them not to hurt her, his voice a blend of love and agony. Now that he listened, Nick could make out what she was whispering as well. It was the Lord's Prayer.

As he took an involuntary step forward, her eyes widened in fear. Fear of him.

"*No.*" His whisper was a denial. A denial of what he had been. What this monster was. He pushed the vampire back inside. He could control it, use it only when he chose to. He could. The killer's smile slowly faded, then brightened again as his eyes caught something behind Nick.

"Ah, the lovely Agent Keller. Come back for another dance, my dear?" His eyes narrowed slightly, and something flickered briefly across his face, was gone. Nick risked a quick glance behind him.

Samantha Keller stood awkwardly behind him, one hip canted upward as she tried to keep her weight off her left leg, which was slicked with blood. A second gash in her scalp had spilled blood down her face, leaving her eyes shining brightly through a mask of blood. A faint smile played over her lips.

"Sam?" Nick's stunned whisper brought no response. She had eyes only for her prey. From behind him, he heard a carefully casual question.

"Cat got your tongue? Or perhaps it was the plate glass." She shook her head in response, and small fragments of glass rained downward. Behind her, blood and glass marked her trail back to the large plate-glass window through which he'd thrown her. Her smile never wavered.

"I see you." Her voice was soft, mocking. "I *see*." She lifted one hand toward her forehead in emphasis, but her eyes never left his. "You wanted so much to be different, to be *special*, didn't you, Mikey?"

"THAT'S NOT MY NAME! I am *Azoth*. I am a Great Beast, not some puny mortal. You try my patience, woman." There was defiance in his voice, but his lips trembled until he clamped them tightly shut.

"No." Her voice was soft and steady through her smile. "You're nothin' but a little boy, Mikey. And you've been very bad, haven't you? That's what your momma always told you, isn't it? That's why you needed to be punished so much. Your momma saw what you are, Mikey. That's why she used the clothespin. The scissors. The oil. She *saw*."

Azoth rubbed reflexively at the thick scar on one wrist before he realized that he was doing it. "No. That was some weak mortal, woman. Not me. I am strong. I have always been strong."

"Even later, when momma was put away for doing the Bad Thing, you were weak. You were bad. Hurtin' the animals made you feel better for a while, but it always came back, didn't it, Mikey? The weakness. Later on, the women saw it. That's why you couldn't get it up. They were laughing at you inside, weren't they?"

Behind her, Nick could see LaCroix speak to the security guard, after which the mortal began quietly leading people out of the building. LaCroix then turned and began walking slowly toward them. The killer seemed almost hypnotized by Samantha's words, and Nick began to sidle slowly towards him. Samantha's soft voice droned on.

"You thought He would give you power, didn't you, Mikey? Make you strong, so no one would ever laugh at you again. You gave yourself to him, sold your soul for a chance to be something other than a weak, pathetic excuse for a human being." Her voice had been gradually losing the soft southern drawl it had in times of crisis, and had begun to thicken. Now, still whispering, she mocked him in a parody of Azoth's own deep rumble.

"Does it feel better now, Mikey? Does killing the weak and defenseless make you feel powerful? The smell of their

blood is intoxicating, isn't it? Their fear is like the sweetest of flowers. You can do to them everything that your momma did to you, that you wanted to do to her. Make them pay. Make them all pay.

"But it doesn't do a bit of good, does it, Mikey?" Her voice had regained its gentle, feminine quality, but the accent was that of a Québécois woman a good many years older than herself. "You're still just the same sad, pathetic little boy you always were. I tried to tell you that you were no good, but you just wouldn't listen. I can see it. They all can. Underneath all that bravado, you're just a scared little—"

"NOOOO!" Azoth/Mikey tossed the old woman aside and launched himself at her. He would shut her up. Stop her vile lies. He wasn't weak. He wasn't. He would rend her into pieces and lick her blood from—

Out of nowhere hands snatched at him and stopped his flight, slamming him to the ground with enough force to knock the wind from his body. *momma?* He pushed the stray thought away, then shoved outward. The man gave way before his great strength, and Azoth forced himself to his knees before weakness suddenly betrayed him and he sagged forward.

momma please, i'm sorry. i'll try to be better, momma please.

A hand dug into his hair and pulled his head sharply back. He opened his eyes.

❑❑❑❑❑

Nick stood above the killer, pulling the skin taut against the man's throat. The jugular vein beat weakly against the skin, taunting him. The man could never go to trial. He deserved to die. It would be only fitting that he die as a victim. Nick dipped his head down toward the waiting pulse.

"Nicolas." LaCroix's voice was soft, but insistent. Nick looked up in irritation. "Not this one, Nicolas." LaCroix had stopped just behind Keller, and was holding up one hand in warning. "You do not want *this* creature's blood flowing through your veins, Nicolas."

Nick looked back down into the man's eyes, one of which stared unseeing over his right shoulder. The blood smell was powerful, but underneath it, there was something else. Something tainted. Sickness ran through this mortal, a sickness which no medicine could heal. To drink from it might be to take that sickness into himself. The man's one good eye blinked, then fixed on Nicolas's own.

"Please . . ." The word bubbled up through blood-stained lips. Was it a plea for mercy? Or for forgiveness?

"Go to hell." Nick grasped the man's chin and twisted brutally up and to the side. There was a sickening crunch. Nick released his hold and wiped his hands distastefully on his coat as the body slumped bonelessly outward to land with a meaty thump on the blood-spattered tile.

hhhaaaaa Air slipped softly and finally from his parted lips as Mikey stared blindly outward into nothingness.

"Very good, Nicolas. Now, why don't we—" LaCroix stopped abruptly and his eyes widened in disbelief as oily black smoke began to trickle from the dead man's eyes. In front of him, Samantha, whose head and shoulders had slumped forward with the death of Mikey, suddenly jerked upright, her eyes widening in horror.

"No . . ."

Something black and shapeless launched itself from the body of Michael Ramsey and toward Samantha. Nick reached out in a blur of vampire speed, but his hand caught nothing but icy smoke. It reached Samantha a second later and she collapsed with a scream of fear and pain.

❑❑❑❑❑

Blackness surrounded her. It caressed her, prodded her, filled every part of her being. It was as sweet as the first whiff of rotted fruit and as seductive as the first temptation. Part of her understood it, called to it. But another part, the stronger part, rebelled. The darkness wanted to rule her. It wanted to remake her into a pale copy of itself as it had Mikey.

No. As she took a deep breath to cry out for help, the darkness slid into her, choking her. Gagging, she fell to her knees in the darkness, frantically trying to expel the darkness from her lungs. It was no use. The darkness swarmed over her eyes, and she knew she was lost.

Through the encroaching blackness she felt a hand on her shoulder. It was ice cold, but steady and calm. The darkness stirred around her in warning.

"*Fight*," the hand's owner whispered in her ear. "*See it* for what it truly is, not what it wishes you to see." Amidst the horror around her, the voice was fierce and proud. That voice would never surrender. She forced her eyes open and stared into the darkness around her. "Not with your *eyes*, woman," the voice chided her.

Open herself up to this? This horror?

"No. I'm . . . I'm afraid." The ultimate confession. It was fear that now choked her, numbed her very soul.

"Then use it. Conquer your fear, my dear, or it *will* conquer you." The voice and the hand then vanished, leaving her alone in the darkness. The darkness jeered at her, mocked her fear and pain. But there was something else. Something . . . fearful? Tentatively, she let down the barriers which kept her sane in the physical world, and reached outward.

The beast was as evil as she had seen, but now that evil was tainted by something else. Something familiar . . . Cautiously, she pushed further.

"You're afraid," she whispered incredulously. "The great beast Azoth is *afraid*. Afraid because . . . because without me, without a mortal host, you'll die. And that terrifies you, doesn't it?" Hot denial flooded over her, but she knew the truth. "You want me? Come and get me."

The darkness surged forward.

❑❑❑❑❑

Nick watched numbly as Samantha writhed in pain on the cold tile floor. LaCroix bent over her briefly, then looked up and shook his head, whether in annoyance or concern Nick couldn't be sure. Outside, the remaining passengers shivered and waited for the police. Far away, a siren screamed toward them. They wouldn't have to wait long. In front of him,

Samantha took a deep breath, then slammed one fist against the floor.

"No one . . . owns . . . me." She slammed her fist down again. "No one." Her body stiffened as if an electrical current had surged through it, then slumped limply against the tile floor. Above them, the electrical lights suddenly blew out and the remains of the front window shattered explosively outward. A black cloud drifted up from Keller's body, coalescing briefly before beginning to drift apart on the winter drafts which flooded the nearly empty terminal.

NOOOOooooooo . . .

Nick and LaCroix pressed hands to their foreheads as the mental cry reverberated through them, fading quickly to a whimper, and then to silence. Between and below them, Samantha shuddered, then lifted her head.

"Well, that was fun." Ignoring her injured leg, she began to pull herself to her feet, then swayed alarmingly. LaCroix deftly reached out and caught one elbow. She nodded her thanks vaguely. "Let's not do that again, shall we?" He voice was faint, but hers and hers alone. After a moment Nick found his voice as well.

"Sounds like a good idea to me. Now, why don't we get you to a hospital?"

She shook her head.

"Hate hospitals. People dyin', cryin'. Makes my head hurt. 'Sides, I think you've got other pressin' concerns." She nodded with her head at the rear windows of the terminal, through which could be seen the first faint light of dawn.

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In the end, they had all left together, LaCroix sniffing at being forced to use the sewer systems yet again. None of them had much to say. At last they reached familiar territory. The Raven was just above. Sanctuary. Janette or some previous, unknown owner had seen that certain modifications were made to the original system, and they were able to pass directly from the sewer into a carefully hidden passage which led into the club's cellar. They ascended the final steps to the main floor in silence.

"I'm going to call Natalie." At Samantha's protest, he added, "You need a doctor. Besides, Nat's probably going crazy with curiosity by now. She's got to know that we were there, and—" He paused as LaCroix looked up sharply. What could—

"Yes." A voice like a dull blade cut the darkness. The house lights flickered on, revealing three men in heavy winter coats standing on the dance stage. "Many people were witness to your activities." The voice belonged to a tall, thin man whose face and bearing proclaimed him an Enforcer.

"We caught the killer," Nick began hopelessly. "A mortal. There won't be any more publicity." He nodded back toward the bar, where the killer's last public message had been left.

"Yes," the man continued. "We have no problems with that solution, although you could have been a little more . . . discreet? What concerns us, Nicolas, is your other loose end. Not very tidy, leaving one such as this alive."

"She's no threat to us."

The Enforcer snorted in reply. "A police officer—a *hunter*—knows about us. You know what The Code requires."

"It's not—"

"Hang on a minute." Samantha slipped painfully off her bar stool and walked up to Nick, on hand clamped over a white towel pressed against her side. "This is the part where you tell me that I know too much, right? Much too dangerous to live, that sort of thing?" She looked calmly across the room toward the waiting Enforcers.

"More or less. You're quite right, you do know too much, Agent Keller. You must die to protect our secret, or—" He glanced first at Nick, then lingered longer over LaCroix "—you must be brought across. It's really quite simple."

"Brought across? Oh, be . . . made a vampire. Well, I've got to tell you, William, I've got a little problem with that. See, I haven't finished working on my tan yet." She tried to smile cheekily, but all that she could manage was a wan, pale smile at the Enforcer's start of surprise. "And for the other, well, let's just say I've got a deep moral objection to dyin', huh?"

The three Enforcers made no reply, but dropped easily from the stage to the floor and began walking toward her. She continued gamely.

"Why don't we talk about option number three?"

"There is no other option."

"Well, I kinda think there is. See, after I ran into Nick here, and he ran into a stake, well, I started thinking. Started thinking that maybe I needed a backup plan. So I made copies of all of my notes, as well as little bits of some very interesting blood and tissue samples which I happened to have, and sent them off to a friend of mine. Now, this friend of mind doesn't know what's in the package. But, should he hear about me being killed in the line of duty, or maybe—" She gestured in mock surprise "—just turning up missing? He's gonna send that package on to the RCMP forensics folks." Her voice and her face hardened. "I expect you might have time to get a few folks out of here before the guys in the white lab coats arrive. Still, they'll have enough to blow your secret sky high." She sighed, and rubbed her eyes tiredly.

"What makes you think we can't get your 'friend's' location out of you?" The Enforcer who had spoken earlier was suddenly right in front of her. "We've had centuries of experience." He reached out, and traced her cheek with a cold, taloned hand. Her eyes came up to meet his, unafraid.

"Give it your best shot, sport."

"It won't be worth your trouble," LaCroix interceded. "The lady is a resistor, you know."

"Hmmph. Of course. And I suppose you believe her story about a little box of evidence, LaCroix?" He looked over at LaCroix, ignoring the younger vampire completely.

"It's possible. Even probable. The question is, can *you* afford not to?" LaCroix leaned casually against the bar, a portrait of indifference. Nick, however, could see the tension his old master was attempting to hide. There was a moment of silence as the Enforcer, William, exchanged looks with his companions. Finally, they reached a decision. He leaned forward, and caressed Samantha's cheek again.

"You know my name. Well, know this as well. We will be watching you. And someday—" He brushed one finger across her lips "—someday, we will return. In the meantime—" He

stepped back, and adjusted his greatcoat "—pleasant dreams." There was a gust of cold air, and the three of them were alone in the room once more.

Samantha shuddered, and swayed on her feet. This time it was Nick who caught her, and guided her gently to a seat. "Thanks, Nick. You know, I don't normally do this sort of thing. Fainting, I mean. 'S kind of embarrassing . . ." She sighed, and closed her eyes.

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Natalie had indeed been relieved to hear from him. Once she had expressed her irritation in his "vanishing act" she also agreed to come to the Raven, where she pronounced Samantha in need of ten stitches, which she provided, and a good night's sleep, which she would also provide back at her apartment. LaCroix had courteously offered to let Nick stay the day, and Nick gratefully accepted.

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"Well, I must say that it will be a relief to have this tedious business over with," LaCroix said as he poured them both a final glass for the day. "Reporters and police officers poking and prying, chasing off the trade." He took a sip, and turned to stare absently at the darkened stage.

"Mmm. The RCMP has officially closed the case. Deranged librarian Michael Ramsey kills twenty before being taken down by a cooperative effort between the RCMP and local police. Samantha will probably get a promotion out of it."

"For whatever it will mean to her. Agent Keller does not hunt for glory any more than we do. An extraordinary woman, Nicolas."

"You sound as if you admire her, LaCroix." Nick grinned, and looked out of the corner of his eye at his old . . . friend?

"Please do not attempt to include me in your fascination with mortals, Nicolas. I assure you, my interest in this *mortal* goes only as far as the respect of one hunter for another. Now—" He set his glass down on the bar "—I am going to bed. If you must indulge this repulsive fascination, might I suggest the television soap operas? I'm quite sure that they will provide you with all the love and angst that you require." With that he swept out toward Janette's old rooms, where he intended to spend the remains of the day.

Nick grinned. It wasn't often that he was able to jab his old mentor so effectively. Perhaps he had hit closer to the mark than he'd realized? Nick shook his head and set his own glass down firmly. The idea was simply too strange. Definitely time to get some sleep. Nick shut off the overhead lights as he headed for the private room and its inviting couch.

As the room's door shut, a chill draft passed over the bar, a legacy of a window not properly sealed. After that, silence, save for the slow dripping of a faucet somewhere in the darkness.

end

Last Knight Plus One

by Stephanie Babbitt

"You are my closest friend," Nick said to LaCroix in a voice that was barely a whisper. He reached out and grasped the stake he had placed in LaCroix's hands; the message was unmistakable. Kill me. Please. Let me be with the one I love.

Nick turned away from LaCroix and knelt beside Natalie's body on the floor. Gently, he took her hand and bent his body over hers, waiting for the blow.

"Damn you, Nicholas!" said LaCroix, raising the stake.

Nick braced himself for the feel of the wood piercing his flesh, entering his heart.

It never came. Instead, he heard the splintering crash of the stake as LaCroix flung it across the room, shattering it against the fireplace.

Nick looked up wildly, betrayal clear on his face. "Why?" he shouted, his voice keen with disappointment and anger.

"Really, Nicholas," came LaCroix's voice, as if from a distance. Nick could see that LaCroix was standing still, and his lips weren't moving. "Don't you think you've taken this melodramatic little episode far enough?"

Nick stared hard through a haze of tears at LaCroix. The ancient vampire began to laugh, but without sound. He looked as much like a demon as anything Nick had ever seen. Suddenly, with a sharp click, all the blinds flew open, and sunlight poured into the room. Driven by instinct, Nick looked frantically for a shadowed spot in which to hide but saw none. LaCroix stood unaffected in the bright sunlight, still laughing . . .

Nick's eyes flew open then. The light seemed so bright! Was it the sun? But no, it was only a naked incandescent bulb burning directly overhead. He was lying on a couch. LaCroix sat beside him with an amused smirk on his face, unselfconsciously licking the blood away from a cut on his wrist even as it healed.

"Well, Nicholas, it would seem you have finally elected to return to the world of the sentient, such as it is," said LaCroix. Nick looked at his master carefully. Yes, the lips were moving, and the words matched. At least that much was back in sync. But . . . they weren't in the loft! And where was . . . ?

"Natalie!" he cried out, leaping to his feet and looking around in desperation. LaCroix reached out, a motion like a snake's strike, and grabbed one of Nick's wrists with no-nonsense firmness.

"Sit down, Nicholas," he commanded. Dazedly, Nick sat. He looked around and gradually recognized one of the rooms in the basement of the Raven.

"Why are we here?" asked Nick with a lost expression. "Didn't you close the Raven?"

LaCroix smiled benevolently. "No, Nicholas. Although, as a result of Divia's terrorist behavior, it will probably be some time before the club regains its previous popularity." His wrist completely healed, LaCroix leaned closer to Nick.

Nick's face suddenly grew dark. "Why didn't you do as I asked?" he demanded. "I asked you to . . ."

LaCroix's face changed to a look of unpleasant impatience, and he held up a hand to interrupt Nick. "Stop. That's quite enough," he said. Nick's fury began to mount, but before he could reply, LaCroix's expression changed to something more magnanimous.

"Although I found your 'closest friend' speech to be quite . . . charming, Nicholas, I must confess that I thought your chosen solution to be rather extreme, given the circumstances. I would have expected you to show more restraint." He cast a slightly patronizing smirk at Nick. "But then, I suppose your physical condition might have contributed to this display of foolishness."

Nick looked at LaCroix blankly, confused. Gradually, he became aware of a stinging sensation in his own wrist. He looked at the wrist just in time to see a cut close itself.

"What day is it, Nicholas?" asked LaCroix, leaning back in his chair and touching tented fingers to his chin.

Nick thought quickly. "It must still be Thursday," he replied. "Lora's suicide was Monday night . . ."

LaCroix chuckled softly. "No, dear Nicholas. It is Sunday afternoon, the fourteenth of April. While your adventure has propelled your consciousness well into the future, I fear that your body has remained immovably in the present day."

Nick stared at LaCroix, his mouth open slightly. April?

"My, but this *has* affected you, hasn't it?" said LaCroix with unusual good cheer. "You have no memory of what happened to you last Friday night?"

Nick shook his head, wordless.

"Ah, well. That would explain some of the strange images I've been reading in your blood, then," said LaCroix. "Divia's poison is stronger than even I realized."

"Divia," said Nick, sounding like an echo. A memory tickled the back of his mind, but he couldn't seem to grasp it. He looked at LaCroix helplessly.

"Let's try this approach, Nicholas," said LaCroix, his expression one of long-suffering patience. "You tell me what you remember, and I'll provide you with the facts where our versions diverge." He sat back and crossed his legs gracefully, picking up a glass of blood from the table beside his chair.

"I don't even know where to start," said Nick.

"Do you remember responding to an 'anonymous tip' that a body had been placed at the Raven?"

"Yes," said Nick quickly. "We found the decapitated body of an Egyptian grave-robber in the beer cooler."

"Very good," said LaCroix, setting down the glass and folding his hands again. "And you remember releasing me from custody when the evidence pointed to *someone* else?"

"Yes," said Nick, smiling in spite of himself. "The men in the holding cell looked like a pack of sheep caged with a wolf."

"An apt observation," said LaCroix, without humor. He leaned forward intently. "What happened next?"

Nick furrowed his brow. "I went home, and I slept." He concentrated as hard as he could, then he looked up at LaCroix as the memory flooded back. "Right before I left for the precinct that night, Urs came to see me. She said she needed to talk to me. I buzzed her up, but when I opened the elevator door, she was . . . dead." His face fell.

LaCroix was silent for some time. "Do you remember who Divia was?" he finally asked.

Nick wasn't sure how best to respond. "Your daughter," he said. Then, softly, "Your master."

LaCroix nodded. "And the killer of your decapitated corpse," he added. Nick nodded, remembering. The two vampires sat in silence. Gradually, LaCroix's face took on a fierce intensity, much like the face he presented to those he would hypnotize. He held Nick's eyes without blinking.

"It was not Urs calling to see you, Nicholas," said LaCroix, his voice low and toneless. "It was Divia. Do you remember?"

Divia? Nick shook his head. "No, LaCroix. That was later. She was waiting in my loft when I came back from seeing Natalie in the morgue, after I found Tracy with Vachon's body."

"Listen to me, Nicholas," said LaCroix quickly. "Very little is as you seem to remember it." Nick drew back, surprised. This was beginning to feel too much like the time a year or so ago when he'd had that breakdown. He looked intently at LaCroix's glass to see if the color of the liquid had changed. But no, it was still blood-red. He looked back to LaCroix's face, his own a picture of confusion.

"Divia came to your loft to . . . destroy . . . you, to take revenge on me for entombing her after Pompeii," said LaCroix slowly. "She slashed you rather severely; in fact, you still have some interesting scars that will be amusing to explain to your colleagues. The wounds she inflicted do not seem to heal in the manner to which we are accustomed." He waited briefly for Nick to absorb this information and to feel about his face and look at the claw marks on his arms. "She also tore open your throat, and for the most part, drained you. She then left you to die." LaCroix seemed almost to sag with this statement.

Nick just could remember being bitten and clawed. "But I recovered!" he protested. "I came to the Raven as soon as I could . . ."

"No," interrupted LaCroix, glancing up sharply. "Urs did come to ask you for help with the young Spaniard, as you remember. But when she arrived, she found you lying in a pool of blood that fairly seethed with Divia's poison, thrashing and screaming nonsense. She realized that the same fate had befallen the both of you, and she came to me for assistance."

Nick sat, bewildered. He looked at LaCroix with a perplexed expression. "Urs isn't dead?" he finally managed.

"Oh, no. She's sleeping a couple of rooms down," he replied, almost cheerfully. "You, however, were almost another matter entirely."

"So—Divia attacked me, and I . . . did what?" said Nick.

"I brought you back here and began giving you my blood in what volumes you could manage," said LaCroix, with little emotion. "Of course, at first, each transfusion caused you to revert to a screaming psychopath. It is most unenjoyable behavior to observe, Nicholas. I'm quite thankful that you passed that stage relatively quickly."

Nick tried to absorb this statement. "What then?" he asked.

"Well, I merely continued to nourish you as I could, in between the more exciting events taking place upstairs," said LaCroix. At Nick's puzzled look, LaCroix smiled and tipped his head slightly to one side. "What do you think happened to Divia?" he asked.

"I killed her. . . . We burned her body," said Nick automatically, then he caught himself. "But wait . . . if I was here?"

LaCroix nodded slightly. "Some of this story *is* as you remember it, Nicholas, though the details seem to have been . . . revised . . . as a result of your illness. I'm sure my blood told you much of the tale, just as the transfer told me what was happening in the reality you were conjuring for yourself." His

face became quiet and serious. "Actually, Divia did come to take her revenge on me, and we had quite the family row. Her strength was remarkable." He shook his head slowly, remembering. "Unfortunately for her, she planned her strategy with the inexperience of her youth . . . her *intellectual* youth, of course." He gestured airily with one hand.

Nick sat quietly, feeling like he was watching a play instead of carrying on a conversation about his own life.

"Fighting a battle, Nicholas, is rather like playing chess," LaCroix observed. "One must anticipate every possible move one's enemy might make and then plan an appropriate response to each move—if one expects to win. Winning a chess game with a child opponent is easy, because the child does not have the experience or the skill to anticipate all the potential moves." He was silent for a moment. "Divia planned her attack quite thoroughly, and she put considerable effort into making her campaign as unpleasant as possible. In that, she succeeded. But she did not take sufficient account of my allies."

LaCroix sat quietly for a few moments, gathering his thoughts. Pain and sorrow flashed briefly over his face, then he set his features in an impassive stare. "When Divia was at the height of her attack, she was so taken with the heady feeling of impending victory that she neglected to leave her senses open to the presence of other vampires," he said, very softly. Nick had to listen carefully. "As she stood in triumph over me where she had thrown me to the floor, Urs shot her from behind with a crossbow."

Nick's eyes opened wide in amazement. LaCroix noticed the reaction, and his face twisted briefly in cruel amusement. "Fascinating implement, that. I really must learn how to use one," he said. Nick turned his face away.

"As you might imagine, the wooden shaft through her heart distracted Divia's attention from me," continued LaCroix. "While she was busy removing that diversion, I went to her and divested her body of her head." He lifted his chin slightly, the proud line of his jaw clear. "Deja vu is a remarkably unpleasant thing," he remarked, as if to himself.

"Did you burn her body and scatter the ashes?" asked Nick quickly.

LaCroix smiled at him with a hint of sorrow in his eyes. "I did," he replied with a slight nod. "The car roof you envisioned was an interesting, if bizarre, touch, Nicholas. Actually, I merely took her body to the club's roof at dawn, placed the . . . sections at an appropriate distance from one another, and watched from inside the stairwell as the sun rose. It was much simpler and infinitely neater than a traditional funeral pyre, as well as being less likely to attract unnecessary attention." He glanced up to take in Nick's nonplused expression. "Incidentally, I did appreciate the sentiments you expressed. It was satisfying to know that you recognized my loss."

Nick's mind reeled. The events with Divia seemed so real to him, yet nothing had happened as he remembered. Nonetheless, the *feelings* associated with it all had been real, for LaCroix had sensed them in his blood. It was so complex, so confusing. . . .

A light tap sounded on the door, and LaCroix looked up calmly. "Come in, Urs," he said. The door opened a crack, and Urs peered in.

"Oh, you're awake!" she exclaimed, stepping into the room and looking at Nick with an expression of fondness and relief. Nick, in response, looked at Urs with astonishment.

"Please forgive our dear Nicholas," said LaCroix in a droll voice. "He seems to have believed you were dead. That is, irrevocably dead." He looked at Nick with amusement. "I believe he is glad to have found out otherwise?"

Nick had risen abruptly to his feet and moved to Urs's side. He reached out a hand slowly to touch her face where he'd seen the flesh torn away. His fingers found only smooth white skin. Urs watched him with sisterly tolerance.

"How is young Javier?" said LaCroix from behind them, causing Nick to whirl around.

"About the same," sighed Urs. "He's not screaming and throwing things around anymore, thank goodness, but the images in his blood aren't making any sense yet." She shook her head wearily. "I hope he gets better soon. He's taking an awful lot of my blood, and I'm using up too much of your stock trying to stay strong myself." She shrugged. "But what else could I do? He is my master, after all."

"The stock isn't important, Urs," said LaCroix. "There's always more where that came from." Nick tensed at that statement, but a warning look from LaCroix kept him from speaking. "Duty to your master *is* the most important thing now, Urs. Do let me know if you require my assistance."

She smiled sweetly. "Thank you, LaCroix. But helping me get him back here alive was more than generous enough, considering the fight he gave us." She put a hand on Nick's arm. "It's good to see you doing better," she said. "Don't do too much too soon, though, okay?" Nick nodded. Urs stood on tiptoe to kiss him on the cheek, then she turned and left the room.

Shaking his head in confusion, Nick walked back to the couch and sat down. "This is just too much," he said, more to himself than LaCroix. "Urs is alive. Vachon is alive—Tracy didn't . . ." Suddenly, an awful thought jumped into his head. Tracy! The escaped prisoner had shot her, and she'd been dying. . . . He'd almost brought her across. . . . He struggled to remember. Had Tracy made it? He looked up a LaCroix, a frantic expression on his face, and started to get to his feet again.

LaCroix put out a hand to stop him. "Your partner is fine, Detective," he said, dropping the title sarcastically. "She was a trifle upset when Urs and I arrived at the church to take charge of the young Spaniard, but between the two of us, we managed to convince her that it was for the best." He raised his eyebrows and smiled conspiratorially. Nick imagined Tracy faced with two snarling vampires, and he shuddered.

"So you got there before Vachon asked Tracy to kill him?" he asked.

LaCroix chortled. "Self-destruction is your . . . hangup . . . Nicholas, not Vachon's," he said. "That young man has quite a lust for life . . . among other things. No, when we got there, he was espousing—at the top of his voice, I might add—the joys of drinking the blood of adolescent virgins. Of course, some of that might have been Divia's madness, but, I suspect, not all." His expression was one of tacit approval.

"But back to Tracy Vetter," he said, shifting in his chair.

"Your young partner is quite courageous, if somewhat misguided. She's also an impressive resister. It took our combined efforts, but she currently believes that her—'supernatural friend', I believe, is Javier's term?—merely had to leave town for a week or two. By then, he should have recovered sufficiently to amuse her again." LaCroix sighed and shook his head in an expressly paternal fashion. "You know, Nicholas, I probably should have killed the girl on the spot, but her dedication to Vachon's well-being at such grave risk to her own survival actually impressed me." He smiled to himself. "Perhaps I am going somewhat dotty in my old age. What do you think?" He glanced at Nick, who knew perfectly well from the absurd terminology that the question wasn't meant to be answered.

LaCroix sighed and picked up the glass again. "You know, Nicholas, you might as well tell her what you are," he said. Nick's eyes grew round, and he looked at LaCroix with outraged disbelief. LaCroix sipped from the glass and stared at it briefly before setting it back down and meeting Nick's eyes. "Well, it's not as if she doesn't already know of our existence," he said. "She'll be safer from the Community and the Enforcers—and we'll be safer from her meddling—if she asks you to handle those affairs that concern us instead of trying to do it herself. Also, your anxious brooding that she's going to be killed trying unnecessarily to protect you is prompting some rather peculiar thought processes." LaCroix grimaced slightly. "Bringing her across? Really, Nicholas, I don't think the Community could bear it."

Nick was about to protest when he contemplated the implications of Tracy Vetter as a vampire. LaCroix was right. It would be like . . . like . . . having to deal with Barney the Dinosaur for all eternity. The thought made him smile even as it made him feel guilty. He glanced sheepishly at LaCroix.

"I'm glad to see that you agree with me, Nicholas," said LaCroix with easy camaraderie. Then, more seriously, he added, "I found it interesting that in your fantasy, you recreated the circumstances surrounding the death of Dr. Lambert's brother to clarify your feelings on the situation." His voice took on a viciously mocking tone. "The mortal white knight, cut down senselessly in the prime of life, poised on the brink . . ."

Nick was listening intently to LaCroix, realizing the truth in his statement, when suddenly, the name registered. Dr. Lambert—Natalie! Oh, God, Nat! He jumped up and grabbed LaCroix by the shoulders, trying to get the question out, but the words stuck in his throat.

Rather than being angered at this handling, LaCroix merely looked at Nick with uncharacteristic lenience. "Settle down, Nicholas," he said. "Your doctor friend is quite alive and remains in possession of all her luscious AB-negative blood, missed opportunities notwithstanding."

Nick's knees buckled under him, and he dropped to the couch like a sack of sand. He leaned his head on the couch's back, breathing hard, and clutched one hand to his forehead. When the first rush subsided, he looked quickly back to LaCroix to gauge his master's reaction. LaCroix showed only indulgent amusement.

"Oh, don't worry, Nicholas," he said. "While I found your fatalistic fantasy to be highly interesting, I do not feel threatened either by the images you showed me or by the person of the doctor herself. I'm sure you know that I would not surrender my creation so easily, but then you also know that your strong-willed coroner would not sacrifice her life so readily to your questionable passions." He sighed, and his eyes grew colder. "Nicholas, you know perfectly well that she cannot return you to mortality with physical affection alone. If you must continue to have your association with her, please plan your agenda carefully. I do not wish to be faced, ever, with the scenario you presented me in your blood this morning." The warning tone in the voice was clear. Nick, looking chastised, did not respond.

LaCroix sighed and stood up, taking his glass. "Well, Nicholas, it's been an interesting conversation, but I do have a club to open. Help yourself to the stock. It may not be your preferred vintage, but you must have it to regain your strength. Oh, and you should probably telephone Dr. Lambert. I convinced her to stay away from the club on the condition that she be informed when you were lucid again." He looked at Nicholas with the disappointed expression of a parent whose favorite son has just announced that he wants to drop out of medical school to hitchhike across the country. After a moment, he turned and walked toward the door with customary grace.

As he reached for the doorknob, Nick said, "LaCroix?"

The elder vampire, looking somehow worn, turned back to his son, one eyebrow up in question.

Nick looked on his ancient master's pale visage with a remarkable mixture of emotions, not the least of which was genuine fondness. Then he smiled slightly and said, "Thank you. For everything." His voice revealed the reluctant devotion he dared not put into words.

The fierce face softened briefly. "You're welcome," LaCroix said with tremendous dignity. He was silent for a moment, then added quietly, "It's as I told you once before. You really do like me, Nicholas. You just don't know that you do."

With a slight inclination of his head, he was gone.

Nick sat on the couch, feeling tired and somewhat dazed, but at the same time almost giddy with relief. Then he remembered what LaCroix had said about the day. Sunday, the fourteenth of April?

Smiling to himself, he got up and climbed the stairs to LaCroix's office. Closing the door behind himself, he picked up the phone and dialed. Two rings later, he heard a click and a bright, energetic female voice. "Lambert."

Warmth flooded through him. "Hello, Nat. It's me. I just wanted to let you know that I'm okay—and to wish you a happy birthday."

The silence from the other end surprised him—but maybe Nat was just too touched to speak?

"Uh, I'm glad you're feeling better, Nick. And thanks for thinking of me . . . but my birthday's in June, remember?

end

Cold Comfort

by Apache

My story is a book written entirely by men's desires.

I had one desire of my own once. For one moment, I thought I had received my gift from life at last, the one comfort I wanted and dared not give myself. But cowardice is always punished, and I woke in the arms of a vampire with the same life I had before, plus a curse: now I would have to murder to maintain my cowardice.

I dreamed of a kindly world and never found it. When I sang for men, I would feel their dreams of such a world rising into the air, clouding it along with their lusts. A generous world, a dream-place of love and fulfillment. Paradise.

As a girl, I looked for that world in men's arms. One after another, I looked for my heart's desires in men's warmth, their generosity, their need to spill themselves into me, to become one. As a woman grown, what I looked for in men's arms was pain, and again I found it.

Pain is what you hunt for if it is the only thing you can feel. Whatever shred of your heart has survived until then will cry out to take the pain, just to know that it still feels. Just to know that it still exists.

So I recognized it when Javier Vachon came into the Raven a few hours ago looking for pain. And I gave it to him: tangled my fingers into his beautiful long hair, wrapped myself around him, took him to a room in back and made love to him with a sad passion.

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After the years of pain, finally I had looked for death, and found it. But death was selfish too, and gave me only what it wanted to give. An eternity, but not the one I asked for.

Javier Vachon is my death, my master. He never questions his right to me, and he also doesn't want it. He meant to make me strong and happy. My misery has baffled him ever since. He gave me strength, yet has never cast me off for failing to use it; gave me what to him is a source of pleasure, but neither debates nor rejects my unhappiness. He doesn't love me, not as a man loves a woman or a creature loves its mate. Not even as a creator loves that little mirror of itself, the created one. But I am his, and in the century that I have been his, it has never crossed his mind not to care for me. And we go to each other, and give and take, as we have done for a hundred years, because there is no other solace.

Javier is generous in this. What he could take, he waits to accept. The passivity makes me pour myself into the void, like trying to fill a bottomless well. Yet that's the only place his heart ever shows itself, in the sex—a heart that is even lonelier than mine, for it doesn't want shelter and kindness, as I do. It wants a high fire it has only learned to conceive of in the course of five centuries.

And he's dreaming of it now as he has never done before, with the mortal girl whose courage he likes so much. The resister he should have killed.

And though he doesn't say it to me, he wants her to come to him more than he has wanted anything since I met him. Maybe more than anything since he was born into this world.

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When he came in, I was dancing. I don't work for Lacroix, but I dance for him, and the others at the Raven, almost every night. I feel the hungers in the air, the mortal ones looking for easy sex, the immortals with their feverish blood thirst and invisible laughter watching, wondering if they dare to choose a victim here. My dancing is part of the hunger, part of the dark spell of existence we all weave there in that loud shadowy room. It is as if I gather those hunting emotions into my body and translate them, and release them back to their owners clarified, stronger, more real . . .

Javier doesn't understand the pleasure I get from dancing for men. He believes me when I tell him it's so; yet I know in his own experience, he has never imagined a woman who dangles herself before men like that to be acting for her own pleasure. Such dancing as mine raises his lust and his wonder at the otherness of women, but he takes that as a pleasure known only to the man.

He could make me stop, but doesn't, won't. He'd just as soon kill all the mortals who cluster near me with salacious eyes for the ugliness of their looking, but lets that crime go unpunished because I wish it so. When he kills from among their number, it is simply to feed, though he has chosen some he particularly despised to find his kiss where they might have expected mine.

And in all our years together, neither mortal nor vampire has raised a hand to me and escaped his teeth—not even the ones I begged him to let go. He won't stop my dancing; he has contempt for it and contempt for those who like it; he has used it as a convenience in arranging his murders for over a century, and he'd be unruffled and glad if tomorrow I told him I would never dance that way again. That's Javier, as he is to me.

To Screed, he's simply cruel, though again what threatens Screed is likely to die at Javier's hands. To Bourbon he was friendly and negligent—right up to the moment he tore him apart and left the pieces for the sun.

I am his lover. His lover, but never his love, and he accepted easily that he was not my love either. I continue to seek that with mortal men, older men than I seem to be, an endless succession of punishing fathers—and one by one, I kill

them. Perhaps Javier is not cruel enough by nature to draw my utmost love.

Yet each time he had to run, I found myself following.

Something has happened in the past week; I heard from others that he and Lacroix went off together one night, though for what I can't imagine, and there has been neither sight nor mention of Tracy Vetter since then, until she came here today. Javier led her out quickly, but later he came into the Raven wearing his bitterness like a flag.

Vampire lovers go deeper into each other than mortals do in many ways, for we drink—that matters the most, there is no restraining that desire, that passion, that need. You may, though many don't, possess each others' bodies in the mortal way as well, though the great surrender has come before. Javier and I both retain the mortal pleasure in bodies, maybe because we each have retained so much of the mortal isolation from others.

When his mood is wild, Javier can be a harsh lover, can bite as if to go through the neck entirely, can take my woman's body like a bull. But tonight his misery was so thorough he came to me slowly, bit by bit.

I took him to a room Lacroix keeps for our kind, wrapped myself around him like a paid woman as we walked. When we got there, he held me away from him for a moment, arm's length, studying me as if I were strange and new to him.

"Urs. Urs." A small voice, for this man so full of braggadocio and humorous swagger; how can that mortal girl have done this to him, reduced him? Immortal as I am, I have no power to hurt him so. He leaned his head toward me, and breathed me in, the fragrance of my hair, my skin, all the blood-tinged scents of our kind. And his hair fell forward around my face, shrouding it, a black, soft curtain. I waited for him to touch me, waited to follow his lead.

It came with a kiss, a kiss such as mortals share, all lips and tongues and softness. He murmured wordlessly into my cheek, brushed kisses across my eyes, forehead, cheeks, the ear. Still as mortals do, he kissed the ear and tongued it, sucked at the earlobe, brought his hands to my face, my hair, my shoulders, gathered me close into him, leaned my head to his shoulder and tilted me against the line of his hip and chest with a gesture both our bodies know so well . . .

He sank his teeth into my neck and drank slowly—a swallow, then allowing the blood to run out onto the skin and licking at it on the surface of my throat—something he knows I like—nestling his teeth into the wound again to keep it open, kissing, lapping more, bathing my skin with his tongue, drinking deeply again—

—he could drain me, I like it so much; he knows I would let him take all of me, leave the husk, let the master have back all but the dregs of the immortal life—so he has always stopped himself for me, he listens to my heart, watches—

—gives me his throat—

—oh god the heat of that, to drink from your master again—

I know now that he didn't have to give me his blood that first night. It could have been anyone's, a mortal's: it just had to be that first feeding. But when that birthing hunger hit me in the mirrored room where I first woke to the new life, he caught my shoulders and turned me toward himself, then undid his collar, opened his vest and his shirt— At the sight of his skin, pale and flawless as the throat curved down to the chest, a new instinct taught me my desire. I became a true vampire and his lover in the same hour.

Now, as I drank, he moved us both to the sofa off to one side of the room, settled us half sitting half lying into it so that I was half stretched across him, and all the while still drinking undisturbed.

He teases me for my way of it, for the small sips I take, has told me to tear, that I won't hurt him . . . and he refuses to say what I know is true, that he has come to love it. The languor in him when I drink is like no other expression in his life; it is a small, sleepy, erotic pleasure he cherishes and will not admit to. Strength giving itself to weakness for love . . . Javier is a man who has discovered surrender, and he will never say it.

He will never tell a woman to take him; how could he? He takes, he rules; acts of possession and control are unthinking first nature with him. Over the years, the number of things he can be bothered to have has diminished to excruciatingly few; now, even Screed and I are on our own, though I know I at least can run under his wing if I need to. To be a vampire was in part a complex extension of his desires as a man. But to discover the pleasures of being taken . . . that came to him once with his master, and after that, never until me.

And I heard his body rumble with the pleasure of it, heard a small happy moan in his throat as I drew those small sips of him into my mouth. He opened our clothing and entered me as a man does a woman, the tiniest frown of concentration flickering across his face as he began to move inside me. I answered with motion of my own, drawing him deep, pushing him shallow, arcing my back away from him then pressing forward. I slid his shirt up his body. He knows I like the feel of skin on skin—our strange cool white skin—and he paused for a moment to open my halter, brushing his hands around my breasts, cupping them, caressing . . . and all the while I drank from him, tiny, intermittent demands on his immortal life, and all the while he allowed that hot, vital flow into me, his mouth a little open with pleasure, his eyes closed, closed . . .

I like that too. I like to watch him. I like to watch all men, even the ones who will have only minutes of intimacy before my need becomes unbearable and I turn them to pallid corpses in my arms. Until I have to drop them and leave, or find a place to hide them, or think to cut their throats for a disguise, like a thieving whore, when my eternal wish is to be the loved one. From my hold on his throat, I look up the planes of Javier's cheeks, see the vampire fangs in the slackened, sated mouth, and the hair lying loose along his forehead, falling over the closed eyes . . . and suck and swallow again, and hear the little noise of yielding in his body.

But now his desire began to assert itself again. His eyes opened, fiercely yellow-green, with almost no expression but hunger itself. His arms came around me like steel bands and he whirled me beneath him on our couch, pushing into me hard and fast, his throat taken away from me, his neck arcing over mine, the heartless eyes measuring . . . His teeth scraped at my skin and took the blood it released, on my face, my neck, my shoulder, ducking down to the breast and biting hard, finding blood even in those small veins, demanding, taking, stealing .

. . And his body beat against mine with a crushing rhythm, and I fought and obeyed its demands all at once . . .

He came as a mortal man does who has had no lover for years, with a great cry of pain and pleasure, and then sank his head down to my neck, the black hair falling over my face, and drank from me . . . again, with that terrible softness, with the immortal spirit in him barely alive, grieving and bitterly lonely.

We lay together afterwards, our pale, cool bodies, so long familiar with each other, completely relaxed as we traveled into our separate thoughts. At such times, Javier strokes me like a pet or a child as he wanders among his imaginings; I don't think he even knows his hand is moving. Yet if I move, he pays attention instantly—do I have a discomfort? A desire?

His pain tempts me to give him what he won't take: Tracy, the little blonde girl. But I think she would do immediately what I cannot do at all: use the sun. As a mortal, I held a knife in my hands many times but never made the fatal cut; as an immortal, I find the blackest depths to hide in even while I am cursing this endless life. What Javier said first about this girl was that he'd been arrested, laughing with the absurdity of it. He doesn't know it, but I do: that laughter was the first act of a surrender he has waited to offer for centuries.

So she has that way with her fears, where I am simply the toy of mine. Such a woman, if she found herself wakening to the night as I once did, might well walk out into the morning and have done with it. Whereas I will never do what a man will not do to me, will never have what a man won't give me.

Of all the men I've ever known, and for all the jewels and furs and perfumes I've been showered with, Javier Vachon was the only man who ever tried to give me myself—however thoughtless or offhand the giving may have been. And only Javier believes I will ever live long enough to find the gift bearable.

end

Dreaming While You Sleep

by Kim Keister

Dreaming while you sleep,
Dreaming while you sleep,
Memories to keep
Are you dreaming while you sleep?

It seemed unreal. The hospital room where Javier Vachon kept his vigil at the bedside of Tracy Vetter was illuminated only by the light over her head which pooled around her head and shoulders and threw the rest of the room into an eerie darkness broken only by the digital displays of the machines which were keeping her alive. Vachon's sensitive vampire senses were rudely assaulted by the harsh hospital smells of disinfectant undercut by disease, which almost entirely smothered Tracy's special scent, which he had once inadequately described to her as "apricots and calla lilies". The doctors had just made rounds, and Vachon had listened unobserved outside her room as an intern, obviously unaware he was being overheard, jokingly described her prognosis to his colleagues: "Well, she has a bright future ahead of her—as an organ donor!"

Vachon considered finding that intern later and requesting the pleasure of his company for a midnight snack . . .

As he was immersed in that thought, alarms from the life-support monitors began to sound.

All my life I'll be haunted by
All my life just one moment in time
All my life—until the day I die
And it will live inside of me

A crash cart followed by several doctors and nurses came barreling through the door, and the room immediately became organized chaos.

Oh I will never be free all my life
Trapped in her memory all my life
'til the day that you open your eyes

Vachon stood unobserved in a corner of the room as the doctors and nurses did their best to save her. He wondered why he hadn't gone against what he knew were her wishes and brought her across when he had had the chance. "Clear!" shouted someone. Closing his eyes as Tracy's body writhed and convulsed as the shock went through her, he prayed he would get another chance. He imagined her waking into his life, her blue eyes turned golden green with the first hunger. He wondered if she would ever forgive him.

The flurry of activity suddenly stopped.

"All right . . . let's call it," said the doctor in charge, unaware that Vachon was there. He snapped off his rubber gloves and tossed them into a biohazard bag. "I'll notify the family."

All my life you lie silently there
All my life in a world so unfair
All my life—and only I'll know why
And it will live inside of me.

Vachon stood over her bed. He slowly pulled the sheet down until he could see her face. Her head was swathed in bandages, and he knew that underneath them her beautiful blonde hair was gone, shaved away in preparation for the desperate surgery done in a valiant but ultimately futile attempt to save her life. At least her face looks peaceful, he reflected. Her eyes were closed, and she looked for all the world as though she might wake at any moment. It was, he knew, how he would always remember her. "Goodbye, Tracy." He kissed her lightly on the lips. "*Cara mia.*" He pulled the sheet up over her face and walked out the door.

Why didn't I do it? Why didn't I bring her across? Nagging thoughts tormented him as he spent hours aimlessly roaming the corridors of the hospital. His love for her had been the force which had kept him alive, which had given him the strength to recover from his injuries and escape the grave which she had dug for him. The hope of one day being with her had literally given him the will to live again.

His thoughts turned to all the other women he had known—those he had loved and lost, those he had killed himself, and those who had been both. He thought of Urs, to whom he had given so little thought about bestowing the unwanted gift of immortality and the consequences. He knew he could not bear to have Tracy hate him for eternity, and he also knew that he had just allowed the one true love of his long, long life to slip away.

The worst part was, he had never told her how he felt about her.

And I will never be free all my life
Trapped in her memory all my life
'til the day that you open your eyes—
Please open your eyes.

He would have his eternity with her.

"*Cara mia*," he whispered.

He closed his eyes.

Javier Vachon opened the door and stepped out into the sunlight.

end

The song, "Dreaming While You Sleep" was written and performed by Genesis (Banks/Collins/Rutherford, 1991)

All the Rest is Silence

by Dorothy Elggren

Day 1

The room echoed with silence. Morning. The sunlight pushed its way into the room and made it glow with the day's first golden light. Dust motes danced in the beams. The rays slowly moved across the room, exploring its contents. The candelabra gleamed with sunlight even as the candles guttered and quietly extinguished themselves, spent from the long night.

Sunlight slid across the piano, the couch, indifferently examined Natalie's purse and keys. Nick's coat, carelessly thrown across a chair, was found by the relentless light. Finally, the golden rays touched the congealing pool of blood and a bloody stylized staff lying on the floor, and moved on to caress the single white pump.

With the morning came a jarring intruder. The phone shrilled loudly in the quiet.

"*This is Nick Knight. I'm either in bed or incommunicado. Leave a message.*" BEEEEEEP.

"Nick?" Reese's voice questioned. "I don't know whether you heard or not, but I thought I should notify you. Tracy Vetter didn't make it. She died a couple of hours ago." There was a pause while Reese marshaled his thoughts. "I know this is tough on you. It's been a hard year already. Remember, Nick, this wasn't your fault. I'd tell you to stay home for a week, but the review board wants to have a preliminary hearing tonight. They've asked to convene at 8:00. I'll expect to see you then. After the meeting we can talk. Then I want you to take some time off and get your head straight, okay?" It was clear Reese wanted to say more but wasn't sure what. After another pause he said, "Try and get some sleep, I'll see you tonight."

He hung up and silence reigned once more.

All day long the sun flooded the loft, exploring all the nooks and crannies it had never seen before. The loft had always been shuttered, barred, and defended against the sun, but not today. The blood slowly dried in the sunny room. The shadows shifted and then lengthened as the day came to a close and the sun slid from the sky.

The phone rang again, shrill and intense in the entombing silence. The answering machine clicked on.

"*This is Nick Knight. I'm either in bed or incommunicado. Leave a message.*" BEEEEEEP.

"Nick?" Grace questioned. "Are you there? Please pick up!" She sounded scared. Silence persisted for a few moments. "Nick, I can't find Natalie. She just packed up all her stuff and left. I've got a note here telling me she's quit and turned in her resignation. I know she got a terrible shock last night, but this is insane. I've called her at home. I even drove over there and she's not there. Please tell me she's with you and you're talking some sense into her. I'm so worried. This is just not like her. Call me, Nick, as soon as you hear this . . . please!"

Grace hung up and the dial tone hung in the air for a second before the answering machine clicked off. It hummed quietly as it reset itself.

Shadows deepened from dusk to night. The loft slid into darkness. The clock quietly marked time, but it had no meaning.

The phone rang again, once more disturbing the eerie quiet of the room.

"*This is Nick Knight. I'm either in bed or incommunicado. Leave a message.*" BEEEEEEP.

"Knight! Where the hell are you?" Reese demanded. "The inquiry board is waiting to meet with you about Dawkins. I know it was a hard night for you, but you better get down here now before you get into any more trouble."

His words echoed for a moment in the air. But then silence reigned again. Minutes passed, seconds ticked by.

Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Click. Pickup.

"*This is Nick Knight. I'm either in bed or incommunicado. Leave a message.*" BEEEEEEP.

"Nick, I just heard about Dr. Lambert. It looks like things are a lot rougher than I thought for you. You had better call in immediately or sooner. There's gonna be hell to pay any way you look at it." Reese hung up, but the fear in his voice lingered.

Click. The machine reset.

Suddenly another phone rang. Nick's cellular in his coat pocket, trilled mutely, muffled in the cloth. There was no answer.

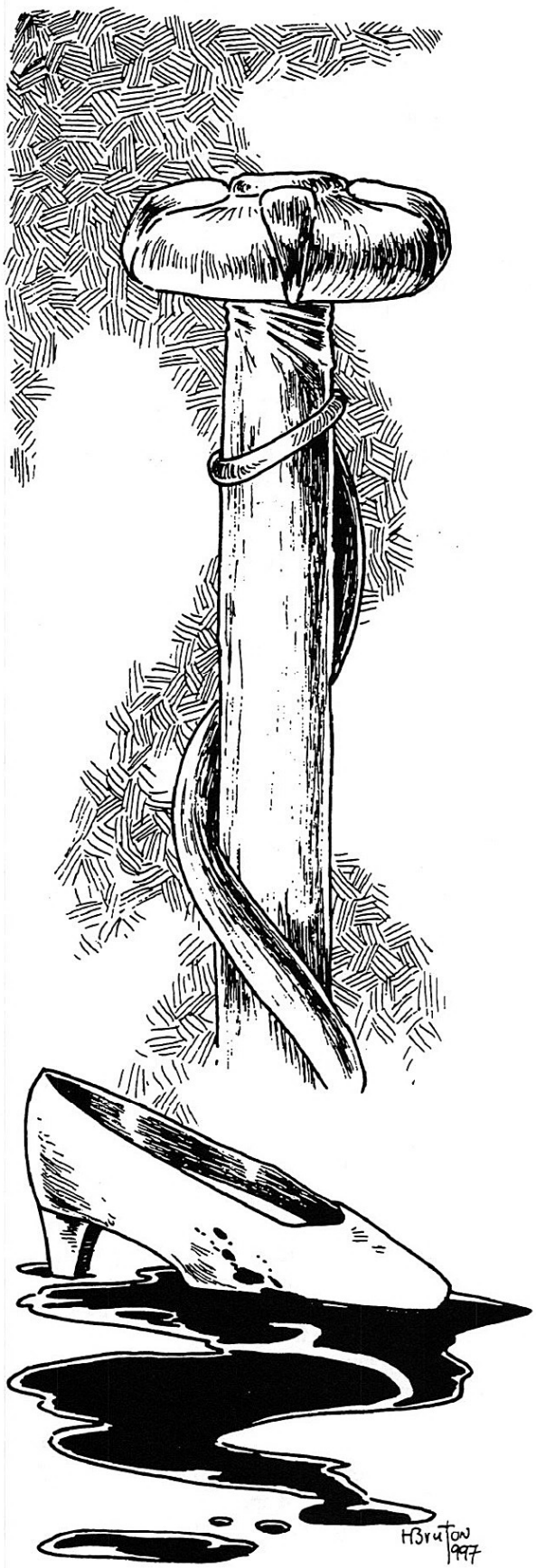
Silence again. Then the phone.

"*This is Nick Knight. I'm either in bed or incommunicado. Leave a message.*" BEEEEEEP.

"Nick. If you don't call in within the next fifteen minutes I'm sending a patrol car by *with* a search warrant. What is going on? Will you pick up?" But only silence answered him. Finally he hung up and the answering machine dutifully reset itself.

Night glided in the window. The moon rose, casting a silver glow. The bloody pool was a dark stain on the moon-whitened floor.

Suddenly a patrol car pulled into 101 Gateway. The headlights illuminated Natalie's car, blocking the garage—and



Nick's car behind it, haphazardly parked. Abandoned. Alone. Empty.

Officers Lloyd and Allen looked at each other. Everyone knew Nick's Caddy on sight, but the gray Ford Taurus wasn't immediately identifiable. Allen picked up the mike and made a request. "Uh, Dispatch? This is 42-Bravo. Could you run a make on license plate LR2 M8B, ASAP?"

While Allen waited, Lloyd stepped out of the car and approached the Caddy. She used her flashlight to examine the interior. She looked back at Allen and shook her head. No one home. She approached the Ford more cautiously and checked it out. The back seat was strewn with file boxes and a suitcase, but that was it. She approached the door and pushed Nick's buzzer. She waited, but there was no response. She pushed the buzzer again. And again. She leaned on it, but nothing happened. Giving up, she returned to the squad car, where Allen was listening to Dispatch.

"Forty-Two Bravo, plate LR2 M8B is registered to Dr. Natalie Lambert of the coroner's office. Do you need any further information?" There was an undertone of unease as the information was reported.

"Yeah, could you patch me through to Captain Reese?" The officers looked at each other silently, as they waited. They'd gotten an earful coming over. Dr. Lambert had apparently quit, after a friend's suicide; she'd packed up and disappeared after her shift. Knight had lost his partner in the shooting at the 96th Precinct and had not been seen or heard from since he'd gone off shift. Not good. Definitely not good.

"Kind of makes you wonder what'll push you over the line, doesn't it?" Lloyd asked as she looked up at the darkened windows.

"Yeah," Allen answered. He followed her gaze. "If they're up there, they've given up electricity and gone deaf. Wanna bet they aren't there?"

Before Lloyd could answer, Reese's voice crackled through the speaker.

"Reese here, what have you got on Knight?" he asked.

"Both Detective Knight's and Dr. Lambert's cars are here, but there are no lights visible in the building, nor do they answer the buzzer. Do you want us to go in, Cap?"

"Yeah," Reese replied slowly, not liking what he was hearing. He hadn't really expected that they would find both their cars. There was suddenly a cold empty feeling in his gut, telling him things he didn't want to hear. "Keep me posted," he said gruffly, hiding his fear.

"Roger." Allen hung up the mike and both officers got out of the car. They retrieved basic B&E equipment from the trunk to aid their efforts. Bypassing the elevator entrance they quickly broke open the door to the stairs and, with guns ready, moved quietly and efficiently up to the door of the loft. Oddly, both felt as if someone had walked over their graves. Allen knocked on the door loudly.

"Open up! Police!" They waited. Lloyd positioned herself to cover Allen as he broke the lock. He kicked the door in and entered, gun ready. Lloyd followed.

In the moonlight, the loft seemed quiet and peaceful. There were no signs of life.

"Knight, Dr. Lambert?" Lloyd called out, as Allen found the light switch. He flipped it on. Lloyd gasped, feeling her

stomach flip. Both stared at the sticky, gooey pool of congealed, sun-baked blood on the loft floor, and the lone white pump abandoned next to it.

"Better check the place out and see if anyone is here at all." They looked at each other, realizing they were probably looking for bodies—either unconscious or dead. It only took them a matter of minutes to determine that there was no one alive or dead in the loft. There was only the blood.

Allen called it in. Reese listened in despair. Blood, shoe, abandoned personal possessions. Things that neither Nick or Nat would voluntarily leave behind. The stone in his gut got larger as he called in forensics and crime scene specialists. Then he heaved himself out of his chair and headed on over himself.

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The sanctity of the loft was violated by lights and activity. A photographer's flash was the first thing to hit Reese's eyes as he walked into the loft. He had never been here, but its sparse utilitarian appearance seemed like an echo of Nick. Nick had never revealed a lot about his personal life; at first glance the loft didn't either.

Spotting Dr. Connors, the forensic specialist, kneeling by the pool of blood, Reese made his way over and stood staring down at it. His gut told him they were dead, but he didn't know why. He wished Tracy was alive—if anyone had any insight into Nick, besides Dr. Lambert, it would be Tracy. You couldn't spend that much time together and not learn something. But she wasn't alive. And now Nick might not be either. The whole thing went way beyond disturbing. Reese instinctively felt that the accumulated events of the last forty-eight hours had a great deal to do with what had happened here.

In fact, Reese was willing to bet that between the suicide and the shooting, the emotional state of both Natalie and Nick had been completely out of control. How those events led to this, whatever it was . . . Well, maybe time would tell. Maybe they'd show up. He prayed silently to God that they would. It was tearing him apart. It was tearing the precinct apart. He could tell it by the way people were acting. It was too much death, too many members of their tight little family gone. Even cops have their limit.

"Dr. Connors? What have you got?" Reese asked.

Connors looked up. His blue eyes looked tired and empty. He snapped off his gloves and stood up. He tiredly shoved his unruly red hair back.

"Actually, Captain, I'm not sure what I've got . . ." He trailed off and stared down at the blood for a moment. "I won't be able to tell you a lot until I get these samples under a microscope, but I can say that the volume of blood here is sufficient to indicate that whoever lost it—is probably dead." Seeing Reese's expression he amended hastily, "Assuming that is, that it came from one person."

"The carved staff—" he gestured towards the makeshift stake "—is obviously the weapon. Somebody was stabbed with it." He looked at Reese with a puzzled expression. "Leaving the weapon and taking the body is a little unusual. Usually, you take the weapon and leave the body . . . Unless, of course, you don't want anybody to know who's dead. But . . ." He trailed off again and looked out the window. "I don't know, Captain, this just feels really . . . weird. I can't place my finger on it, but something's different about this."

Reese placed a hand on his arm, "Relax, Doctor, I know. Things have been happening way too fast for me, too." He looked around the room and rubbed his chin. "I know what you mean, it does feel weird. But we aren't gonna find any answers that way. I really need your help on this, and as fast as you can pull it together. If there is any chance that either one of them is alive . . . well, I'd like to keep it that way."

Connors nodded. "We'll get this bagged and in the lab ASAP. I'll let you know."

"Thanks," Reese said, and moved past him to talk with Allen.

"What've you got, Allen?" he asked when he got the officer's attention. Allen had been scribbling in his notepad.

"We've found Dr. Lambert's purse, keys, coat, and presumably one of her shoes," he said, looking at Reese. "It looks like she came directly here after leaving the morgue. All of her files are in the back seat of her car. Dr. Connors has asked to take a look at them to see if there's anything there that might help him get an idea about what was going on in her mind."

"So, Dr. Lambert was here, and when she left, it probably wasn't of her own volition. Never knew a woman to leave her purse behind, let alone a shoe." Reese shook his head, feeling tears trying to form. He banished them. He'd have to deal with his own feelings later. Right now he had a crime scene to run. "What else?"

"Well, Knight's cellular was found in his coat pocket, his car keys were found on the piano. We also found his ID in his coat. It seems unlikely that he would have left without them." Allen looked at Reese forlornly. It wasn't as if he knew either of them that well, but he'd heard a lot about Knight, seen him around, and had always gotten the feeling that he cared more than he ought to about the cases. And Dr. Lambert, well everybody knew her, she'd always been bright and cheerful in the face of everything. It was just a lot to deal with on top of Detective Vetter's death. The whole precinct was spooked. Three in less than forty-eight hours.

Reese patted him on the back. "Thanks, Allen. Just hang in there. We all gotta hang in there." He walked back to the center of the room.

"Listen up, folks," Reese said loudly, getting everyone's attention. "Let's try to find out what happened here as quickly as possible. See if you can find anything on the streets, maybe somebody saw or heard something. We owe it to them, these are some of our best. Right now it doesn't look very good, and I won't try and gloss it over, but let's try to be positive here, okay?"

People nodded and bent back to their tasks and Reese left. He found Dr. Connors outside stowing Natalie's files in his Blazer. "Dr. Connors, I'd appreciate it if you let me know as soon as you have any information. If you need anything, let me know."

Connors nodded.

Reese looked around one last time, his heart heavy. He

knew there were only questions here, not answers. Knight had always been an enigma. Not only a loner, but someone who managed to keep his personal life completely apart from work. Reese could think of no one besides Natalie who had entrance to it. Whatever entrance she had found seemed to have swallowed her up as well. He guessed he should go back and start looking at Nick's personnel file. Maybe there'd be something to tell him who else he could talk to. Maybe. Shoulders slumped under the burden, Reese departed.

After a while, the swarm of technicians diminished. Evidence had been scrutinized, samples taken, and the loft had been bagged, tagged and gone over with a fine-tooth comb. Finally, the lab people withdrew, leaving a lone officer to lock the door and place the yellow warning tape across it. His solitary footsteps dwindled away, and silence reigned once more.

The night moved on, the moon majestically crossed the sky and set, and the sun once more found entrance to the loft. Its bright rays lit up the room again, but the loft was only an empty shell left behind, the wreckage of Nick Knight's life.

Day 2

Reese pondered Nick's file. The commendations. The reprimands. His history. He looked at the information on his career in Chicago, and decided to give someone a call, maybe they could tell him about other friends or family.

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Dr. Scott Connors was just finishing his careful perusal of Natalie's files when he found the slim black book. It was worn and stained, but no title adorned its cover. He opened it curiously. The first page was blank, so was the second and third. On the fourth page in her neat handwriting, it began . . .

July 8, 1990: Subject has agreed to try a series of tests to overcome condition. Since there is no data available on this condition—nor likely to be—tests will be based on information given me by Subject. We are beginning with a series of tests to find out if we can replace current diet with protein drinks.

The pages continued with page after page of various formulas, consistently followed by the same notation: unsuccessful. Interspersed with the dietary data were blood sample data. Over and over again was the comment: 'No change.' Connors became intrigued, as he realized nowhere was the condition described, and the pattern of tests followed no recognizable standard. It was almost as if she had been flying blind.

The blood data was odd, too. The one dated January 28 included a stapled-in laser printout from a tunneling microscope. He stared in amazement. She had circled what looked like extra nucleotides, the likes of which he had never before seen. What had she been working on, and why was she so vague about it? He looked at the daily log on the opposite page.

Jan 30, 1995. We've had a major breakthrough. The tests I've been running with the Litovuterine-B seemed very promising. They have eliminated the v-factor in all blood samples taken from Subject. Today I gave 1 cc to Subject. Immediate reaction sent him to the floor in pain, but within moments he was up saying it was gone. Time was 7:18 a.m. Subject immediately went outside, and suffered no ill effects. We will need to run batteries of tests, but we may have found a cure!

Then only a few paragraphs later he saw . . .

Litovuterine-B is a fix. Subject is needing more and more to keep the symptoms from returning. He is delusional, angry, and unable to separate facts from his desires. I cut off the supply today, and he broke in and stole it.

The virus has mutated around the litovuterine-B within hours. I wish I had someone to discuss this with. He was so happy, and now I've almost killed him, made him a junkie. Oh, God, I don't know if I should be trying to do this. I don't know what I'm doing.

He rifled through the pages, knowing he would come back and scrutinize every line.

July 17, 1995. Subject has been backsliding. He's returned to his original diet. I think he's losing hope. I wonder if I'm losing hope. He keeps trying for every quick fix. He no longer seems to be trying—is it only for me that he continues, or is this a temporary slump?

Nov 2, 1995. Subject was shot in the head. I had to do some major work to keep anyone from noticing anything. Had help from LC. Who'd have thought we would actually work together? Not me. I've always thought he was a thoroughly evil bastard, but I'd never really met him until tonight. I still think he's an evil bastard, but it's obvious he loves Subject.

Nov 28, 1995. Subject has suffered another major problem. He was possessed. Not sure I believe in devils, but what I witnessed tonight . . . well, I'm not sure what to believe. Subject has regressed further in his diet. He is struggling. I think I may have lost the battle. He's growing closer to LC. Never thought I'd see it after what he's said, but there it is.

Don't know what to try next. Maybe it isn't just a physical condition . . .

Feb 8, 1996. Subject's friend J has overcome condition. I couldn't believe it when she said how she did it. I still can't believe it. I'm so angry at Subject, all he could say was he couldn't risk my life that way. I'm so angry at me, I just stood there and said I know. I feel as if I'm on a tight-rope wire, and I'm beginning to lose my balance . . .

Connors realized that he wasn't looking at just a medical journal, but possibly the core most important thing in Natalie Lambert's life. She hadn't come out and said it, but she obviously loved the "Subject," and based on what he knew about Nick Knight and his "skin" condition, the journal was about Nick.

What the hell was the condition? He'd never seen anything like the blood and RNA samples. Maybe he should brainstorm with Reese. No, he should read this thing from cover to cover first, then he could talk to Reese.

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Reese hung up the phone, dumbfounded. Nick Knight had never existed in Chicago. At least not as a physical reality, but only as a computer paper trail. How'd he ever managed to create a background like that and not be found out? How had he ever managed to be a cop? And yet Nick was a good cop. He'd cared deeply and passionately. But that didn't change the facts. Nick Knight didn't exist before he came to Toronto. So who the hell was he? All he had were a lot of dead ends and silence. Maybe there was a good reason why he couldn't find any friends, why he'd kept his personal life so damn quiet.

Reese scratched his head and stared at his notes. Feeling a thirst, he headed for the water fountain (hope springs eternal, you know) and, after a futile attempt, gave up and headed for the coffee machine.

He poured himself a cup of coffee that had been percolating too long. It looked strong enough to kill an elephant. He sighed and gently rocked the cup in his hand, watching absently as the thick liquid swirled around. He had a meeting in—he glanced at his watch—two hours and forty-seven minutes to be precise, with the review board for an update. He wasn't sure he wanted to reveal what he had found out—or not found out, depending on how you looked at it.

He turned and looked back at the squad room, watching the bustle and activity. Right in the middle of it, there was an empty, quiet spot. Vetter and Knight's desks. In his mind's eye he could see Tracy Vetter perched on the edge of her seat, arguing with Knight, pushing the limits, trying to learn. Always eager and bright, running headlong into danger, with only Knight's experience holding her in check. Reese felt an unaccustomed tightness in the back of his throat, and his vision blurred. He looked down at his coffee. It didn't help. He could see Nick sitting there at that damned desk holding some piece of evidence in his hand, staring into space. How often had he seen him zone out like that over some piece of information, or something someone said. He'd often wondered where he'd gone when he did that. Now he'd never know. He liked to think of it as Nick's mental library, because whenever he'd come back, he'd be off on some weird, bizarre tangent that inevitably ended up being the answer. It was so strange . . . and yet so intrinsic to Knight.

He looked back over at Nick's desk and saw more memories. Natalie Lambert smiling at Nick, arguing with Nick, being kissed by Nick. As far as information lines went, the squad room had one of the best records for knowing everything that happened almost before it happened, but nobody could ever figure out what went on between those two. There had been more than one pool betting on when they would get together, and even one on when they would break up.

He could hear their voices, see them, feel them. He couldn't believe they were gone, and what was he going to tell the board? Hell, he couldn't tell them Knight didn't exist—not yet, anyway. And he couldn't define why he was keeping this quiet. He mentally shook himself and headed back to his office.

As he sat down, he looked out into the room and found his eyes drawn back to the empty, quiet desks. Forlorn, alone, avoided. He could hear the hush, and he felt he couldn't sit there a moment longer. With that, Joe Reese got up, grabbed his keys and walked out of the precinct, bound on a mission. Damn the review board. Damn it all.

He found himself staring up at Nick's apartment. Appraising the loneliness of it. The fortress-like appearance. The security. A place where someone could barricade himself away from the world. His eyes narrowed and creases wrinkled his brow. A place where you could leave your past behind.

Slowly, reluctantly, he pulled the tape from the door, unlocked the deadbolt placed there earlier by the forensics team, and let himself into Nick Knight's home. The sun streamed into the room, but it wasn't warm. It felt chill and empty. Reese avoided the stained floor and made his way to the bookshelves, looking to find the quintessential Nick.

The collection of books was eclectic, to say the least. Knight's tastes were very wide-ranging, but nothing seemed to beckon him. Reese leafed idly through the stacked paintings. They were infinite in their variety. Some were classical in style, some impressionistic, but most were screamingly expressionist, cubist, or abstract. Some sent messages of fragile hope, most sent messages of despair and hopelessness. He'd heard that Knight was a painter, but he'd had no idea he was this good. If these paintings expressed Knight's feelings, he'd hidden a lot behind that mask.

Reese sat back on his heels, dumbfounded by the strength of the paintings. He realized he was sweating. Grunting, he pulled himself up and moved on, glancing back at the paintings, realizing he didn't know Nick Knight at all. He looked at the carefully displayed artifacts, wondering what they had meant to Nick, and then he wondered where the money had come from to buy them on his salary. He made a mental note to check, hoping he didn't get another shock like when he called Chicago.

He browsed through Nick's mementos and pictures. Not too many of them, but one stopped him and he looked again. Three people stood on a sidewalk with Nick. The clothing style seemed oddly out of date, and he couldn't place where the picture had been taken, but it looked like Europe. He turned it over. The back only said Lily, Bernard, and Herr Toffler.

Germany, he wondered? He noticed there was no date. His alarms were going off again. Uneasy he looked around the room and noticed the richly carved walnut cabinet. He approached it warily. Put out a hand and pulled it open. Inside was a painting of a beautiful woman. The painting itself appeared to be old, very old. It looked like something you'd see in a museum. How the hell did Nick Knight own something like that? He shut the door and then sat down heavily on the couch. His gut was telling him more things he didn't want to know and his head was telling him that maybe it was something nobody should know.

He pulled himself up, his coat stretched taut across his broad back, outlining his fleshy frame briefly in the sunlight. He walked to the door and looked back at the quiet room. It felt like a mausoleum, it felt empty and hopeless, like Reese. He opened the door and left without looking back again.

His next stop was Natalie Lambert's apartment. Once more, he pulled the yellow tape from across the door. Forensics had been in earlier, looking for clues. Compared to Knight's place, her place seemed bright and cheerful and full of life. Just as opposite from Knight's dungeon as you could get. Made you wonder what they had seen in each other.

Again he felt like an intruder, but this time it was as if he had stepped into a peaceful place full of hope and faith. But he found nothing. He stopped and looked for a long time at a picture by her bed of Natalie Lambert and Nick Knight, laughing and holding each other.

He left abruptly, swearing. Sweat dripped off his forehead, produced by fear and anxiety. While he had not gotten any clues, what he had gotten was a sense of personality and place, and it left him feeling edgy and scared.

Behind him, a serene unearthly silence reigned in Natalie's apartment. The sun smiled on her abandoned possessions, caressed them and dusted them with light, giving them one last loving brush as daylight began to withdraw. Hope lived there, and faith, too, in stark contrast to the turbulent darkness at 101 Gateway Lane.

Day 3

Scott Connors twisted his neck, stretching it, making faces. He rubbed his bloodshot eyes tiredly. He stretched in the chair and decided it wasn't enough. Getting up, he traced a path around the edges of the room, unaware that his fingers trailed along the wall. He'd just pulled the strangest all-nighter of his life. Night shift had been Lambert's preferred shift, and now he began to understand why. Because she could be with Knight, a man who lived by night and hibernated by day.

He'd read the journal, cover to cover, twice. Not once did she mention him by name—or anyone else for that matter. Just elusive initials. LC, J, V, and S. LC and J made appearances throughout, V was a late-comer and S had only made one appearance on stage. Something to do with the "fever." Another obscure reference.

It was a scary journey he'd been on, following her through the six years the journal covered. One filled with hope, frustration, fear, and anger. It started out as a log, but had become so much more. Almost like it was the only place she could say anything, yet she'd said so little. So damn much left out, like she'd been afraid to write more than what it took to keep it straight. Connors found himself back in front of the microscope. He looked through it again. No difference. The blood sample stared back.

He'd taken the blood sample and compared it with the data in the journal. It was the same blood. It didn't have a type, it didn't match with anything, and he didn't know what to do about it. He suspected Lambert had a good reason not to talk about it, and he wondered if it wasn't a line of reasoning he should follow, too.

He pushed his untidy hair out of his face and looked at his watch again. Reese was working days now, due to all the review board stuff. He ought to be in his office by now. He punched in the number and listened to the phone ring.

"Reese," the gruff voice answered.

"Yeah, Cap, it's Dr. Connors. I think we need to talk. Someplace private." He felt his hand getting sweaty on the phone. He felt like he was committing a crime, and he was scared for no good reason.

There was a pause, and it stretched for what seemed hours to Connors. "Okay, Doctor, where and when would you like to have this talk?" Reese asked in a voice that suddenly had a barely discernible note of fear.

"I'll pick you up in front of the precinct. Ten minutes, okay?" Connors said succinctly.

"Yeah," Reese said slowly. "I'll be waiting."

The dial tone sounded in his ear. He couldn't believe it. No questions, Reese would meet him. Connors reached over and grabbed the journal, turned around and pulled the sample from the microscope. Hastily he assembled everything and threw it into an evidence bag. He looked around, mentally assessing the room. Had he gotten everything? He hoped so. Grabbing his coat, he ran out of the room and trotted down the hall, hoping no one would stop him. The door to the lab swung to and fro silently behind him.

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Reese wiped the sweat from his brow and looked through the glass to the squad room. He noticed how everybody was avoiding looking at Detectives Vetter and Knight's desks. It was hard on everybody. He sighed and heaved himself up from his desk. Lt. Miller met him in the doorway with a manila folder.

"Accounting said you wanted this right away, Cap," she said, diffidently handing him the account, her eyes not quite meeting his. He looked at the title on the folder. It was labeled simply, "Knight."

"Thanks," he said, taking it. He watched Miller make her escape and wished he could, too. He sat back down and opened the folder. It was a record of Knight's bank accounts. He stopped breathing suddenly as he skimmed the file. He

stared at the dollar figure. *Hell!* It *was* like being hit with cold water. Three. Million. Dollars. In various accounts. Not a lot of traffic on it. Knight lived simply, it seemed. Rich, but simply. He thought about what he'd seen in his house, the Caddy, his clothes. Money hadn't seemed to matter to him. Come to think of it, power hadn't seemed to matter, either. Just getting the job done. He wondered where the money had come from. He glanced through the pages. Apparently he'd had it before coming to work at Metro. Another damn mystery. Reese felt like he'd stepped into the Twilight Zone.

He looked at the clock and swore. Locking the file in his drawer he headed for his meeting with Connors.

He instinctively knew Connors was running into the same walls of silence he had. That was why he wanted to talk to him and Reese didn't like it one damn bit. Incredibly enough, he timed it right and walked out of the precinct just as Connors rounded the corner in his Blazer.

Reese pulled the door open and climbed in. Connors had it in gear before he even got the door shut. Reese glanced at him, then took a good long look.

"You look like hell, Doctor," he offered.

"Yeah," Connors glanced at him. "I feel like it, too. Been up all night—" he rounded the corner and pressed down a little harder on the gas pedal "—trying to figure this thing out . . . and you know something, I don't think we ought to. Funny, it's my job to figure out what happened and why, but this time . . . But if you don't mind I also don't feel real comfortable discussing it until we get someplace way the hell away from here." He glanced over to see Reese watching him with an unreadable expression. "Want some chips?" he offered throwing his chin the direction of the back seat.

Reese glanced back and then looked at Connors again. "Yeah," he said thoughtfully, "don't mind if I do." He reached into the back seat for the chips. *Couldn't hurt*, he thought to himself. He munched on chips trying to ignore the feeling in his gut until they reached their destination.

Only the radio filled the silence after that, until Connors pulled into a parking lot of a small suburban park, where there were no cars at all, and only a single man sitting on a bench reading the paper within view.

Connors turned the ignition off and they sat in silence for a couple of minutes. Finally he looked at Reese, to find Reese looking at him. He cleared his throat.

"I found a journal among Dr. Lambert's files," he said baldly. "It's not exactly something you'd like just anybody to take a look at. In fact, I don't think she intended anyone to ever see it."

"What do you mean by that?" Reese asked curiously, watching Connors play nervously with the steering wheel.

"Well, it started out as a log on some experiments she was doing—exactly what I'm not certain, and though she doesn't say who the subject was, I'd be willing to bet the bank it was Knight. She's very careful not to state the condition or the problem, or name any names. I think she kept it that way because it was dangerous. Why it's dangerous I can't put a handle on, but all the way through, she makes little references to the fact she shouldn't have any of this on paper, because if 'they' found out, her life wouldn't be worth a tinker's damn. Anyway, she was apparently doing a series of tests trying to eliminate or modify certain elements in his blood." Connors stated that last part very carefully, not certain how to continue.

Reese raised an eyebrow and looked at him. "So . . . ?"

Connors shifted uncomfortably. Suddenly he was trying to put into words things he hadn't consciously even thought out. What if he was completely out in left field? *What if . . . Ah, the hell with it, just say it!*

"That's the problem, Cap. I don't know what the elements are." He pulled the journal out of the evidence bag and opened it to the page with the printout from the tunneling microscope, and showed it to Reese. "There are extra nucleotides in this sample. I found those same nucleotides in the blood from the floor of the loft and on the staff. What I didn't find was a blood type. None. Nada. Zip."

"No blood type? That's not possible!" Reese interjected, amazement coloring his voice.

"Yeah, I know. I triple-checked the tests. I even did them over, twice! No blood type, extra elements every time. It's like he's got a blood type that has never been recorded before. It doesn't match any blood profiles at all." Connors pushed his hair out of his face and noticed he was sweating again. He shifted in his seat and looked at Reese.

"This log that Dr. Lambert kept turned into a hell of a lot more than a log. It turned into a journal of what she's been doing and feeling and thinking for the last six years. Oh, she starts out objectively enough, but you can see it—she got less and less objective. Probably because she fell in love. I don't know why they started on this course. I don't know what the objective was. What I do know is that whatever was different about Knight was standing between them like an ocean, or a giant chasm. This thing was a gulf between them that they couldn't cross." He flipped through the pages and found an entry towards the end, and read it to Reese.

Feb 23, 1996. I really screwed up this time. I completely lost my objectivity. I used Subject's blood to try to help someone else whom I will call K. And it did, temporarily. His intelligence increased to the point of normalcy. Subject was angry with me. I went specifically against his wishes, but I thought it would help, give K a chance to be like everybody else. What I didn't understand was the side effects. I administered only 1 cc of subject's blood to K. However, K became violent and delusional. He was destroyed when he realized what he had been missing all these years, and knew it would be gone in 24 hours.

I had hoped that his intelligence would remain. It was a calculated risk. And I was wrong. Subject had to clean up for me and reestablish the trust that had been destroyed between K and his guardian. What I had never realized before was that the violence is inherent in the condition. I never realized how tight a rein he has to keep on himself every waking moment. I made some assumptions that after all this time, those desires and feelings were in the past. I even said as much to him only six months ago. Only now do I realize why he didn't answer me.

After seeing how a little of his blood affected K, I began to realize why he might never let himself be close to me, or say what's in his eyes. He just can't afford to let down his guard for a second. The demons are with him always. I would give anything for him to be free of this curse. Anything. And I don't know if there is a cure. Funny, if it wasn't for this damned thing, we would never have met, and yet because of it, we can never be together.

Connors shut the journal and drummed his fingers for a moment on the cover.

"The problem is, Cap, that when I start adding up everything I know here, I get nervous, and wonder if maybe her line of reasoning is the only one to follow—shut up and cover up."

"What?" Reese exclaimed. He looked Connors over carefully and began to think he needed a vacation.

"Yeah, I know, it goes against everything I was trained for. It's my job to figure out what happened and why. I'm supposed to find what people are hiding, and you know what, I've always enjoyed it. It was a puzzle I couldn't put down, but now . . . Shit!" He looked at Reese with an air of puzzlement. "Sorry, Cap. It's just that now I'm starting to think maybe some things aren't supposed to be solved."

"Why don't you explain that a little more carefully," Reese said soothingly, trying to calm Connors down. He was acting a little manic, and Reese didn't need to lose another member of the Forensic team.

"Okay. F'rinstance, we have no valid blood type for the blood, but it matches Dr. Lambert's samples." The words were tumbling out, almost rolling over each other. "I looked up Knight's records, and he's listed as B-positive. The information was supplied by Dr. Lambert. If anyone knew better, she did, and yet she signed the record. I looked up his last physical, and guess who gave it to him? Right again. Natalie Lambert! And that stuff about how his blood affected 'K,' that sure as hell doesn't sound like something that would happen outside of science fiction! I've never heard of anything like that—she gave this 'K' person a tiny dose and it affected his intelligence? And then he got 'violent and delusional?' It's just too weird!"

Connors stared out the window for a moment, and took a deep breath. "While I'm at it, I might as well make a first class idiot of myself here. Knight couldn't go out in the sun. Period. Just didn't do it. Knight was on a stringent diet. Hell, I asked around the squad room last night about his eating habits, and you know what I found out? No one could recall ever seeing the guy drink a cup of coffee, or eat a donut, or join them for pizza. No. One. Then there's the arrest records." He noticed Reese's look. "Yeah, I looked briefly at them last night, too. I guess I was obsessing or something. Anyway, I found three different records where perps said some really strange things about him that managed to land in the records. One called him a monster, another said he shot him and he should be dead, and a third said he flew. Granted the guy had been doing drugs for forty-eight hours, but still . . ."

Connors shrugged, and then continued, "Did you know we found blood in his fridge?" At Reese's look Scott looked away. "Apparently it isn't the first time. He was arrested about two years ago by IA. According to the records he had steer blood in his fridge. We found it, too. Knight said it was for painting. Some technique or something. But there was *five* bottles of blood." Connors' mind skittered around an idea forming in his head. What if Nick had not been exactly human? What if . . . ? He clamped down on his thoughts. He couldn't, wouldn't believe them. "What if it wasn't for painting? What if it was for something else? Cap, when I add this up, I'm looking at something that does *not* compute. I'm not sure I wanna compute it."

"So, what are you saying, then, Doctor Connors?" Reese enunciated carefully.

"I'm saying what Natalie Lambert knew got her killed. And I think that whatever it was that Nick Knight was doing or *was* probably got him killed, too. Natalie Lambert was terrified of 'them,' whoever they are, that's why she didn't write much down. Maybe 'they' found out and came after Knight and Lambert."

Connors looked at Reese and Reese stared back impassively. Underneath that bland face his mind was racing. Knight didn't exist. Knight's unobtrusive wealth. The photo. The painting. The money. He was allergic to sun. Lambert was trying to cure him of . . . what? His blood didn't type. Suddenly his hands were sweating. He realized Connors was still talking.

". . . maybe we should just say that it's Nick's blood, substitute a B-positive sample and let it go. I don't think this one falls under the jurisdiction of the Toronto police department. I think it falls under UFOs, Unsolved Mysteries or Mythology and we are never going to find the answer. At least not answers that anybody will believe. Cap, I don't think I want to find the answer. Hell, I don't believe it and I'm looking at it. I'd like to remember Nick as I knew him. Not as . . . I dunno," he finished lamely, almost ashamed. He never thought he'd be saying things like this.

Silence filled the air. Connors waited for Reese to kick his butt. But he didn't. Reese drew a deep breath and let it out.

"All right. We've got some unexplainable factors. We've got a medical examiner who was hip deep in something she was terrified about. Furthermore she chose not to say or do anything to get herself out of the situation. She wasn't coerced, and she wasn't doing anything technically wrong, if you don't count the misinformation about Knight's blood type. Right?"

Connors started. "Uh, right," he echoed.

Reese continued, "We've got a detective, with some inconsistencies in his diet and his blood that may tie into what Dr. Lambert was working on." Reese thought to himself, *I'm not sure I even want to think about <u>that</u> right now.* "And *this* doesn't go any farther either," Reese warned him. "Knight's history in Chicago is false and he had more money than you or I could ever dream of."

Connors blinked, stunned and then he pushed his hair back off his face. It fell back down. He didn't notice.

"We've got a mystery, with more questions coming in every damn minute and no answers, no leads and no clues." Reese looked at Connors. He rubbed the side of his face wearily. "I'm not sure that I want to know the truth here, either. But that's our job. To find the truth. Question is, is the truth gonna help in this case? I don't know that yet. But I'm

gonna find out."

Reese sat up a little straighter, and looked Connors in the eye, pinning him. "I'm not one to accept ghosts or the supernatural, or UFOs or any other damfool thing. Not on my watch. At least, not yet. You keep looking, but you keep it all under your hat. Don't give out any information to anyone, or delegate any of this. Got that?"

Connors swallowed and realized he hadn't been annihilated for talking heresy (like hiding unexplainable facts, and outright lying about results). He wasn't happy to keep looking, but he'd do his best. And hope to hell that he didn't end up dead for trying to reach into a black hole for information.

"Yeah, I got it," he said.

Reese patted him on the shoulder kindly. "Don't worry, Connors. I'm not going to have you put out a report with any *science fiction* in it. If we can't find a blood type, we'll give it Knight's recorded blood type. Hell, we know it's his anyway." Reese couldn't believe he was saying it, but he knew it was true. If Lambert had kept the unexplainable a deep, dark secret, who was he to let the sun shine on it. Did the world really need to know Knight didn't exist, that he was richer than anyone thought? He bet Lambert had known, and she hadn't said anything. He just didn't know, but maybe a couple of days would shed some light in that direction.

"Let's plan on de-briefing on Friday, to see what else we've got. Then we'll decide what we're gonna do."

Feeling more settled for their brief soul-baring session, both unconsciously relaxed. Connors started up the Blazer, and they headed back.

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The real-estate agent opened the door a little too vigorously. It was well oiled and banged loudly against the wall. He walked in with his three potential buyers. The place was silent and dark. He flipped on the switches, bringing the place to dim life. It wasn't meant to be bright in here. The three wandered around, interestedly inspecting the place. One checked the bar, another thrust his way through the chains and checked out the dance floor. The third looked into the back room. They regrouped after the brief checkout and the agent began the formal tour, spouting information about the Raven. Thirty minutes later, they left. The door slammed behind them and the lock clicking into place echoed through the empty room. The chains swung gently. It was almost as if you could hear music, but there was none. The Raven lay empty. A home, a haven abruptly and permanently abandoned, much like LaCroix's hope.

If one listened closely one could hear the echoes of past conversations . . .

And what if we take these lives seriously?

Then we get hurt, Nicolas. You know that. We get hurt.

Day 4

Quiet hushed music floated over the room as it emptied. Uniforms mostly, going out to prepare the way. Commissioner Vetter sat staring at the coffin, unable to believe it. She was dead. His bright-eyed, golden-haired daughter. Caught in a fire-fight. A stupid, senseless shooting. And no one to explain what happened. His face tightened over it. He knew somewhere in his brain that Knight hadn't been responsible. The report said he didn't know she was there. He hadn't even been in the building when it started, but . . . still he wanted Knight. He wanted to scream at him, he wanted him to tell him what happened. He wanted answers. He wanted Tracy back.

Silently, tears flowing down her face, his estranged wife sat beside him. Saying nothing, but when she looked at him, it was in her eyes. The blame. *Damn you for making her into a cop. She should have been doing something else, not playing with guns.* He could read it all. But then she'd been saying it for years, he thought wearily. He felt tears leaking out his eyes, and running silently down his face.

Reese put a hand on his shoulder, startling him. "Commissioner," he said quietly. "It's time."

Six officers marched to the front and picked up the coffin. Tracy's pallbearers were officers who had worked the beat with her. There was no one from Homicide. The one who should have been there, wasn't. The Commissioner helped his weeping wife up, and they followed the coffin out. Watched them put it in the hearse. Silently. The breeze blew loudly around his ears. His senses seemed to overload. Every sound was magnified. He felt his heart push its way into his throat. Someone touched his arm and then they were being helped into a car.

Twenty motorcycle cops escorted Tracy to her last resting place. Following the procession were as many black-and-whites as could be spared. Laying one of their own to rest. Honor for the fallen in the line of duty.

Many who paid their last respects were from Homicide and almost all thought of the two still missing, and vowed they would be found. There would be answers.

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Grace returned home, and sat down in her rocking chair. She stared out the window. She laid her head back against the caning of the chair and felt the tears start to flow again. Sydney jumped up into her lap and snuggled down. She looked down into his upturned face and caressed his ears. "Don't worry, Sydney," she whispered, "they'll find her." But the words sounded hopeless in her own ears. She looked out the window and worried about Natalie. "Where are you, girl, where are you? Come home, please?"

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Reese returned to the precinct, weary. He felt as if ghosts walked with him every step of the way to, through, and from the funeral. He kept expecting to see Nick sitting there, struggling with the weight of his guilt. He remembered so clearly the look on his face when he'd talked with him at Tracy's bedside. The hopelessness and hope warring in his face. "She's got a chance," Nick's voice echoed in his head. She'd never had a chance, really. They had both known it. He'd offered his help, but he hadn't stayed. Duty had called. He should have stayed. If only he'd stayed. Would Nick be here? Would Natalie? He looked at the desks. Still a gray and empty place in the squad room.

He brought a box over and gently put it on her desk. He felt his throat close up. Slowly he pulled the drawer open and began to clean out Tracy Vetter's desk. People looked at him out of the corners of their eyes, and went about their business. Nobody said anything. Reese looked over at Nick's desk, and wondered how soon he'd be doing the same thing for him.

❑❑❑❑❑

Connors sat down in the lab and closed his eyes. He hadn't known Tracy very well, but he'd gone to pay his respects. He'd wondered for the millionth time about what Tracy might have known. How close had she been to Nick Knight, or to Natalie Lambert? He laid his head on the desk and closed his eyes. Too many. Too many dead, and nothing he could do would change that.

❑❑❑❑❑

The last of the cars had long since rolled away from the cemetery. All was silent. The grave was quietly filled in and the sod laid. A mass of flowers then paved her resting place. Tracy Vetter was only a memory. Her loves, her hopes, her dreams and desires shattered by a bullet.

Day 5

Connors and Reese met in a quiet little restaurant. Over lunch they talked quietly.

"Nothing has come in from the streets. Nobody saw nothing," Reese said. "The uniforms have turned in their reports and they aren't hearing even a whisper from informants. They just vanished off the face of the earth. Basically, we are at a dead end. Commissioner Vetter is demanding action, but we can't take action on what we can't find."

Connors nodded silently. "Cap, I have been through all the evidence. There are lots of fingerprints from his place that we can't trace, but that's not unexpected. Other than that, I can say it is Natalie's shoe. We were able to positively identify her blood type from the residual sweat in the shoe."

He dropped his voice a notch and continued, "Can't do anything about the blood, though. It still doesn't come out in any tests." He hesitated. "I put down on my preliminary report that it's B-positive and matches Nick's blood type. I haven't reported anything from her journal." His eyes met and locked with Reese, challenging him to say something.

Reese sighed and looked into his coffee, hoping it would give him inspiration, but all it seemed to do was give him indigestion. That or the burrito, probably the burrito. He looked at Connors. "I'll let it stand for now. The information there doesn't point to anything or anyone that can help. But we may have to open it up, if nothing comes up."

"Yeah," Connors agreed. Then he reached down and pulled his briefcase up onto the table. He took the journal out and held it lightly in his hands for a moment, then held it out to Reese. Reese looked at it, and then looked at him questioningly. "I think you should have this. Read it and then lock it up someplace safe. Maybe you can figure out what is the best thing to do."

"Maybe," he said through a constricted throat.

Connors got up and left. Reese sat there letting his coffee get cold. Finally he pushed himself up and walked out into the sunshine, the slim journal—the only physical clue to the mystery known as Nick Knight—held in his hand. He stood there on the sidewalk, letting the sunshine wash over him. He felt like he was going to cry. He thought about Tracy Vetter. Her bright smile. Her instincts had been good, but she'd never gotten a chance to hone them. He thought of Natalie and her calm voice. The look in her eye when she'd look at Nick. Nick. The way he'd look at her.

He looked at the journal in his hand. He knew it didn't hold the answers. He didn't know if he wanted to know the answers. He would read it. Then he would lock it away. Officially, the investigation was still hot, but he knew that with no clues and nothing new coming in, it would go on the back burner, and then it would quietly disappear into the unsolved cases.

He missed him. He missed him more than he thought possible. His maverick, uncontrollable cop, with his brilliant mind, and crazy conclusions that didn't even get near left field. A thousand memories flickered through his mind.

Tears slid down his cheeks, and he let them fall unchecked. They were probably dead. In his heart he knew they were dead. He hoped they were together wherever they were. He hoped they were at peace.

He headed back to the precinct. He had a lot of work to do.

end

Holy Ghost R.
Bay of the Holy Ghost.
ENCH
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MEXICO
Magdalem R.
S'Iago d. Vallos
Paunco
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